The Uncollected Stories

Volume 1, 1899-1904

Rafael Sabatini

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The Fool's Love Story

The Ludgate, June 1899

Chapter I

Kuoni von Stocken, the Hofknarr of Sachsenberg, heaves a weary sigh and a strange, half-sad, half-scornful expression sits upon his lean sardonic countenance, as, turning his back to the gay crowd of courtiers that fills the Ballroom of the Palace of Schwerlingen, he passes out on to the balcony, and bends his glance upon the sleeping town below.

Resting his elbows upon the cool stone and his chin upon his hands, he may breathe the free, unpolluted air of heaven, out here; he may permit his face to assume what expression it lists; in a word, he may rest—if rest there be for one whose soul is full of bitterness and gall, whose heart is well-nigh bursting with the hopeless passion it conceals.

He is sadly changed of late, this nimble-witted fool! Time was when his jests were bright and merry and wounded none save the arrogant and vain who deserved no better; but now, alas! he has grown morose and moody, and moves, listless and silent, deep in strange musings from which he but awakens at times, to give vent to such bursts of ghastly and even blasphemous mirth, as make men shudder and wo-men cross themselves, deeming him possessed of devils.

His tongue, from which the bright and sparkling *bon-mots* were once listened to with avidity, is now compared, not inadequately, with the fangs of some poisonous snake. And many who have felt its stinging sarcasms, pray devoutly that his Majesty may soon deem fit to look about him for a new jester.

The young French nobleman, the Marquis de Savignon, in the honour of whose *fiançailles* with the lady Louisa von Lichtenau, tonight's *fête* is held, seems to have become in particular the butt for the jester's most biting gibes. This the Court thinks strange, for the young Frenchman has ever treated Kuoni kindly.

What is amiss? Some swear that he is growing old; but that is untrue, for he is scarce thirty years of age and in point of strength and agility—though but a jester—he has no equal in the army of Sachsen-berg. Others jestingly whisper that he is in love, and little do they dream how near the truth they are!

Alas! Poor Kuoni! For ten years he has gloried in his suit of motley, but now of a sudden he seems to grow ashamed of his quaint black tunic with its cap and bells and pointed cape, and in his secret shame, at times he hangs his head; at times he curses bitterly to himself the fate which has made him the sport of courtiers, and which seems to forget that he is human, and that he has a heart.

As he stands upon the balcony, gazing aimlessly now up into the starlit summer sky, now down upon the sleeping city of Schwerlingen, his long, lithe figure bathed in a flood of light from the window behind him and his ears assailed by sounds of music and of revelry, the wretch-ed jester feels—as he has never felt until to-night—the bitter ignominy of his position. In an agony rendered all the more terrible by the despair that fills his soul, he flings himself down upon a stone seat in a corner, and covers his face with his hands. Thus he sits for some few moments, his vigorous frame shaken by a fierce sobbing which no tears come to relieve, until a step close at hand bids him make an effort to overcome his emotion.

The tall, slim figure of a girl stands for a moment framed in the open casement, and as, raising his eyes, Kuoni beholds her, he springs suddenly to his feet and turns his pale countenance towards her, so that the light from the room beyond falls full upon it, revealing clearly the signs of the storm of agony that has swept across the jester's soul.

An exclamation of wonder escapes the girl at the sight of that distorted face.

"Kuoni!" she cries, coming forward, "what is amiss? Have you seen a ghost?"

"Aye, Madame," he answers, in accents full of bitter, bitter sadness, "I have indeed seen a ghost—the ghost of happiness."

"And is the sight then so distressing as your face and tone would tell me? Why, I should have deemed it otherwise."

"Yes, were it tangible, attainable happiness that I had beheld; but I said the ghost of happiness—in other words, the reflection of the joys of others—a shadow well calculated to strike despair into the hearts of those wretches who may not grasp the substance."

"And are you one of those wretches, Kuoni?" enquires the girl, her tone full of an interest and sympathy such as a wise man might have misconstrued but which the fool does not. "Why, 'tis said," she continues, "that a jester's is a gay and careless life. I have even heard it said by some of those fine gentlemen yonder that it gives rise to envy in them."

"I doubt it not, I doubt it not," he answers with a laugh of scorn, "and I dare swear there are many of them whom a fool's cap would fit better than it does me!"

Then abruptly changing his tone and becoming earnest—

"Fraulein von Lichtenau," he says, scarce above a whisper, "this *fête* tonight is given in honour of your betrothal; will you deign to accept a poor jester's deepest, sincerest wishes for your happiness."

There is something so strange and curious in his tone that the girl feels herself unaccountably moved by it.

"I accept them and thank you, friend Kuoni, with all my heart," she answers kindly, giving him her hand.

"You call me friend Kuoni," he cries, drawing a step nearer. "You call the poor fool, *friend*! May God bless you for that word!"

"Kuoni! Kuoni!" comes a voice from within; but he heeds it not as, stooping, he raises her hand to his lips and kisses the slender fingers, as one might kiss a sacred relic.

"May God bless you, Madame, and if ever it should be your lot to need a friend, I swear it, by the Mass, that he whom you now honour with that proud title will be at hand."

Then, tearing himself away before she has time to answer, he enters the *salon*.

"Kuoni! Kuoni! Where are you?" cry a dozen voices.

“I am here,” he answers sourly; “what is amiss? Are there not fools enough assembled in one room, but that you must clamour for me to swell your number?”

He has worn a mask too long to forget the part he plays in life, and as he stands now before them, all traces of his late emotion have disappeared from his face, albeit the natural expression, half-melancholic, half-scornful, remains.

With his dark eyes he sweeps the glittering throng of Court beauties and gay gallants waiting for someone to take up his challenge.

Where are Felsheim, Altenburg, Briedewald, and the other witty triflers of ready tongue? Silent! All silent—for they know the jester’s virulence too well to expose themselves to its venom in open Court.

It is the *débonnaire* young foreigner, the Marquis de Savignon, who is rash enough to cross weapons with him.

“They tell me, Kuoni,” he remarks with a complacent laugh, and in excellent German tainted but slightly by a foreign accent, “that you are thinking of abandoning the motley and turning courtier instead.”

“That were easy,” answers the jester with a shrug, “for ‘twixt fool and courtier there lies but a difference of designation.”

“Aye, aye,” goes on de Savignon, “but ponder for a moment, my prince of fools, and think of what would become of Sachsenberg in your absence. His Majesty will never find such another fool!”

“Not unless he appoints you my successor,” is the cool, sharp answer, whereat a titter arises among those who stand about, which makes the vain Frenchman turn pale with anger.

“You seem to forget, master fool,” he says harshly, “that you are addressing the Marquis de Savignon and not bandying words with a fellow-clown!”

He has wounded the jester more deeply than he imagines, and Kuoni’s proud spirit writhes and swells within him ‘neath the stinging lash of the Marquis’ scornful words, which remind him anew of the gulf that lies between their social positions. But naught of this is visible on his face, over which a bland, indulgent smile is softly spreading.

Only those who are well acquainted with him notice the slight compression of his thin lips, which, to them, forebodes a cutting retort.

His head on one side and his hand on his chin, he regards de Savignon for a moment through lids half closed, as it were, in languor. Then, slowly and almost wearily, he makes answer:

"Nay, Monsieur de Savignon, forgetfulness, methinks, lies more with your family than mine. Was it not you yourself, my lord, who, whilst at the siege of La Rochelle—so the story goes—one day when the Rochellais made a fierce *sortie*, forgot where the battle was being fought? So that in your absent-mindedness you galloped madly south, and by nightfall you were found at Royan, a good ten leagues from the scene of action."

It is de Savignon's turn to tremble now, and as a great burst of laughter greets the jester's sally, his complexion is of a greyish tint and his teeth are clenched in anger, noting which, Kuoni continues pitilessly:

"Do you not see the humour of it, my lord? Why look so glum? Bah! You weary me; there is no more wit in your soul than milk in an oyster!"

And with an easy laugh which contains almost a ring of contempt, the jester moves away to let others feel the sting of his tongue, from which none, save the King, are sacred.

For a moment, the Frenchman follows the tall symmetrical figure with his eyes, then, deeming it best to affect unconcern, he shrugs his shoulders and, giving vent to a mirthless laugh, passes out on to the balcony to seek balm for his wounded spirit at the hands of his betrothed.

Chapter II

During the weeks that follow upon the night of the *fête* whereat Kuoni von Stocken so signally insulted the Marquis de Savignon, these two men are careful to shun each other's presence.

The proud and vain French cavalier is not likely to forget the humiliation to which he has been subjected, and the memory of it is wont

to make his fingers close over the jewelled hilt of his toy dagger and black vows of vengeance arise in his heart, fostering the hatred in which he holds the jester.

But it is not *his* dagger alone that is ready to do murder. Ugly thoughts are running in Kuoni's mind, and one night when de Savignon sits, easy in spirit for the while, telling the lady Louisa something that he has already recited to her upon several former occasions, he little dreams that from the curtains at his back two great lustrous eyes are watching them, and that a nervous hand is gripping a keen Italian blade. Did he but know how near at hand is death, his laugh would be less gay, his manner less unconcerned, his mind less easy. But he knows naught of this, and some angel must be watching over him, for the armed hand, uplifted in menace, does not descend, the jester sheathes his poniard and departs noiselessly the way he came.

But as the weeks go swiftly by and the nuptials of the marquis are fast approaching, the strange and unaccountable moodiness of the whilom lighthearted jester grows more and more accentuated. Each day he seems to grow visibly thinner, as if some fell disease were gnawing at his vitals and slowly sapping his life and strength. Each day his pale cheeks appear paler and under his eyes there are deep black circles, sug-gestive of pain and suffering and sleepless nights.

A more wretched, woe-begone picture than the poor fool presents, when none are by to spy upon his feelings, it were difficult to conceive.

Meanwhile, however, there are other and graver matters to be considered in the kingdom of Sachsenberg than the secret agony of a lovesick jester. Rumours are abroad of a conspiracy to overthrow the Sonsbeck dynasty, organised, it is said, by many great lords, tired of their young King, Ludwig IV., who seems overmuch engrossed in imitat-ing the vices of the Court of his French cousin to pay great heed to matters of state and the welfare of his people.

'Tis a weakness not uncommon to kings, especially young ones, for monarchs are but ordinary folk when stripped of their purple. Ludwig, however, is blessed with a character which, in some matters, is as firm and earnest as it is weak and frivolous in others; moreover, he is doubly

blessed in the possession of an astute and far-seeing servant in the person of the Ritter Heinrich von Grunhain, the Captain of his Guards.

He has been forced to listen to the grave things which this gentleman has to relate, concerning the dissatisfaction of some of the nobles who are zealously inciting the people to open rebellion, and a drastic line of action has been drawn up.

The King is seated in his cabinet one night, about a month after the *fête* dealt with in the preceding chapter, and a week before the day appointed for the wedding of the lady Louisa von Lichtenau.

Around the table five men are grouped; two are old and faithful servants of the late king, his father—the Duke of Ottrau and the Count von Horst; two are men still in the prime of life, Ritter von Grunhain, the Captain of his Guards, and Herr von Retzbach, his Minister; whilst the fifth is none other than the gay young Lord von Ronshausen, his favourite.

There is a solemn and anxious look upon the faces of these six men, for it is being decided that upon that very night Sachsenberg shall tear a gruesome page from the history of France—there is to be a parody of the St. Bartholomée in Schwerlingen before sunrise.

"It is better thus, my lords," says the King, and although his face is pale and haggard, his voice is calm; "for were we to publish the matter, and give the traitors open trial, who knows what might ensue? Men are ever ready to revolt against those who rule them, and who can say but that the trial of these rebels would swell the ranks of the disloyal—for treason is an infectious malady—and prove the signal for open revolt? As it is, when the news goes round, to-morrow, that ten noble lords have been found murdered in their beds, there will be much marvelling and much surmising—also, maybe, some grief—but those who have listened to the doctrines of these ten, and sharpened their weapons in anticipation of a fray, will understand, and will be stricken with terror at the awful fate which has overtaken their leaders. Believe me, gentlemen, they will be silent and they will disperse."

"Will not your Majesty consider—" began the grey-haired Duke of Ottrau; but the King cut him short.

"I *have* considered, my lords, and I have *decided*. What matters the manner of these men's death? They have richly earned their fate, and if

they were openly tried they could not escape the scaffold—so what difference does it make whether it be the dagger or the axe? None to them, but much to me."

The tone is too determined to permit of further argument. It but remains for Grunhain to receive his Majesty's instructions.

"Here is the list, Captain," the King continues, taking a paper from the table. "I will read out the names of those whom we have sentenced: Kervenheim von Huld, Nienberge, Blankenburg, Eberholz, Retzwald, Leubnitz, Hartenstein, Reussbach, and the French Marquis de Savignon."

"Concerning that last one, Sire," ventures Ronshausen, the favourite, "has your Majesty remembered that he is a subject of the King of France?"

"I have," answers Ludwig, "and I have also remembered that he—a foreigner to whom I have ever shown great favour and consideration, and who, were he to live, would wed one of the noblest ladies of my Court—couples ingratitude with his treason. No doubt he whom they intend to set up in my stead has bribed him richly; but he shall pay for his folly, as others are paying for theirs, with his life: and I fail to see how I am to be made accountable to the King of France for the chance assassination of a subject of his, in my capital. The matter is settled, gentlemen; Ritter von Grunhain knows how to see to its execution. There is no more to be said," he goes on, rising, "but when you hear midnight striking in the belfry of St. Oswald, say a prayer, gentlemen, for the repose of the souls of ten traitors whose knell it will be sounding. And now, let us join the Court."

One by one, they pass out after the King, and then, when the door has closed upon the last of them, a head peeps forth from the rich damask drapery that curtains one of the windows, and a pair of dark eyes hastily survey the room: the next instant the curtains are parted and Kuoni von Stocken steps forth.

There is a look of fierce, almost fiendish exultation on his swart face, and the low mocking laugh that bursts from his thin lips can be likened to nothing save the chuckle of the Tempter in his hour of victory.

"So, my lord of Savignon, you have been meddling in politics, eh?" he murmurs, rubbing his lean, nervous hands together; "and tonight you die. Fool! Arch-fool! That you should be well-born, rich, high in favour

at the Courts of France and Sachsenberg alike, did not suffice your greed, but you must wish to become a moulder of history besides, and like many another such before you, you have destroyed yourself! Oh, what a thing is man! Faugh!"

And with a sneer of contempt for the whole human race in general and the Marquis de Savignon in particular, Kuoni flings himself into the chair lately occupied by the King.

"To think," he goes on, "that a man about to become the husband of such a woman as the lady Louisa von Lichtenau should trifle and fence with death! By the Mass, Sire," he cries, raising his long arm and speaking as if the King were there to hear him, "slay him not! Spare him and clothe him in my suit of motley; he is too marvellous a fool to die!"

Then, of a sudden, the mocking smile fades from his face, to be replaced by a grave, sad look, as the thought occurs to him: "What will the lady Louisa think tomorrow, when the news is carried to her? How will she bear it?"

That she loves de Savignon with all her heart and soul the jester knows full well, and as he thinks of it he grinds his teeth and drives his nails into the palms of his clenched hands.

His imagination pictures her as she will be tomorrow, and into his soul there comes a great overwhelming wave of sorrow and of pity for her, which cleanses and purifies it of the sinful joy which it harboured but a moment back. "She will pine away and die of it," he tells himself, "even as I am pining and dying for love of her! Alas! poor Louisa!" And he sighs heavily and sorrowfully. Then resting his chin upon his hands and his elbows on his knees, he sits there deep in thought, his eyes bent upon the floor.

And thus he sits on for nigh upon an hour, thinking strange thoughts in a strange manner, and revolving in his mind a strange resolve. At last, chancing to raise his eyes, his glance alights upon the gold and ivory time-piece. The sight rouses him, for springing suddenly to his feet—

"Himmel!" he cries. "It wants but half-an-hour to midnight—to the sounding of *his* knell."

He pauses for a moment, undecided, then walks swiftly towards the door and disappears.

Chapter III

Now it chanced that, owing to a fire which had, a few days before, destroyed the Palais Savignon, in the Klosterstrasse, the marquis found himself the guest of his future father-in-law, the Graf von Lichtenau.

Upon the night in question—which a scarlet page of the Chronicles of Sachsenberg tells us was that of the 12th of August of 1635—de Savignon had retired to the room set apart in his suite as his bedchamber, just as eleven was striking.

Feeling himself as yet wakeful, the Frenchman, whose mood is naturally a poetic one, takes down a French translation of the *Odyssey*, and, flinging himself into a luxurious chair, is soon lost in the adventures of Ulysses on the Island of Calypso. His heart is full of sympathy for the demi-goddess and of contempt for the King of Ithaca, when a rustling of the window-curtains brings him back to Sachsenberg and his surroundings, with a start. Glancing up, he beholds a dark shadow in the case-ment, and before he can so much as move a finger a man has sprung into the room, and Kuoni von Stocken stands before him with a strange look upon his face.

Imagining that the visit has no friendly purport, the Marquis draws a dagger from his belt, whereat the shadow of a smile flits across the jester's solemn countenance.

"Put up your weapon, Monsieur de Savignon," he says calmly, "I am no assassin, but there are others coming after me who deserve the title."

"What do you mean?" enquires the Marquis haughtily.

"I bring you news, Monsieur," replies Kuoni, sinking his voice to a whisper, "that the plot to overthrow the Sonsbeck dynasty is discover-ed."

The Frenchman bounds from his chair as if someone had prodded him with a dagger. "You lie!" he shrieks.

"Do I?" answers the other indifferently, "then if it is not yet discovered, how comes it that I am acquainted with it?"

Then, as if blind to Savignon's agitation, he goes on in the same deliberate accents.

"I also bring you news that his Majesty is possessed of a list of the names of the principal leaders; that your name figures upon that list, and that it is the King's good pleasure that when midnight strikes from St. Oswald it will announce to ten gentleman that their last hour on earth is spent; for into the room of each there will penetrate three executioners to carry out the death-sentence which was passed upon them without trial, two hours ago, by the King."

The Frenchman is too dazed to reply for a moment; he drops back into his chair, his cheeks blanched with terror and his eyes staring wildly at the jester. The matter is too grave, Kuoni's manner too impressive, to leave any doubts as to the accuracy of his statement.

"And are *you* one of the three assassins to whom my end has been entrusted?" says de Savignon at length, a gleam of hatred in his eye and the memory of his feud with the jester in his mind.

"No," replies Kuoni simply.

"Then why are you here?" the other cries vehemently. "Why? Answer me! Have you come to gloat over my end?"

"I have come to make an attempt to save you," is the cold, proud answer.

"To save me? Did I hear you aright?"

Aye, to save you. But come, my lord, there is not a moment to lose if I am to be successful. Off with your doublet. Quick!"

And as the Marquis mechanically proceeds to obey him, the jester goes on:

"In front of the Rathhaus, at the corner of the Klosterstrasse, you will find a carriage in waiting. Enter it without speaking; the driver has received his instructions and will convey you to the village of Lossnitz, three leagues from here. There is a suit of clothes in the coach, which you will do well to don. When you stop at the hostelry of the Schwarzen Hirsch, you will find a horse ready for you; turn its head towards the frontier; by sunrise you will be a good fifteen leagues from Schwerlingen, and beyond King Ludwig's reach when he discovers that you have not died; whilst to-morrow night, if you ride well, you should sleep in France.

Come, take my coat." And, advancing, Kuoni holds out his long black tunic, which he has removed whilst speaking.

The livery of motley makes the Frenchman pause, and a suspicion flashes across his mind.

"This is not one of your jests, sir fool?"

"If you doubt me," cries Kuoni, with an impatient gesture, "wait and see."

"No, no, Kuoni, I believe you," he exclaims, "but why is this necessary?"

"Why?" echoes the other. "Oh. thou far-seeing sage! What would the coachman who is to drive you think, did he behold a cavalier return in my stead? Besides, what if you chanced upon your assassins between this and the Rathhaus? Do you not see how my cap and bells would serve you?"

"True, true," murmurs the other.

"Then waste no more time; it wants but a few minutes to midnight now. Come, on with it!"

Savignon wriggles into the black velvet tunic and Kuoni draws the hood, surmounted by the cock's comb, well over his head, so that it conceals his features, then, standing back to judge the effect:

"By the Mass!" he ejaculates with a grim laugh, "how well it becomes you! Did I not always say it would! Here, take my bauble as well, and there you stand as thorough a fool as ever strutted in a Royal anteroom. Who would have thought it? de Savignon turned fool and Kuoni turned courtier! Ha! ha! 'tis a merry jest, a jest of that prince of jesters—Death!"

"Your merriment is out of season," grumbles the Marquis.

"And so is your chocolate hose with that tunic; but it matters not, 'tis all a part of this colossal jest."

Then growing serious of a sudden: "Are you ready? Then follow me; I will set you on your way."

Opening the door, the jester leads the nobleman, silently and with stealthy tread, out of his chamber and down the broad oak staircase.

He pauses by the wainscot, in the spacious hall below, and after searching for a few seconds, he alights upon a spring—which, fortunately,

he knows of old. A panel slides back and reveals an opening through which he conducts the Frenchman.

They emerge presently into a courtyard at the back of the mansion, and through a small postern they pass out into the street.

Here they pause for a moment; it is commencing to rain; the sky is overcast and the night is inky black.

"Yonder lies your road," says Kuoni; "at the corner you will find the coach. Do as I told you, and may God speed you. Farewell!"

"But you?" exclaims de Savignon, a thought for the jester's safety arising at last in his mind; "are you not coming?"

"I cannot. I must return to impersonate you and receive your visitors, for, did they find you gone, the pursuit would commence before you were clear of the city, and you would, of a certainty, be taken."

"But you will be in danger!"

"Have no concern on that score," is the reply, delivered in grim accents.

"But—"

"Enough of *buts*; begone before midnight strikes, or, by the Mass, your stay in Schwerlingen will be unpleasantly prolonged. Farewell!"

And, stepping back, the jester slams the door and de Savignon is left alone, shivering with cold. For a moment the idea again occurs to him that he is being victimised by Kuoni. But he remembers that were the plot undiscovered the jester would scarcely be in possession of the secret.

Next he begins to marvel why Kuoni should evince such solicitude for his escape and for his life, after having always shown himself so bitter an enemy in the past. However, fear overcomes his doubts; so, swearing that if the fool has duped him he will return, if it be only to wring his neck, he sets off briskly in the direction indicated.

Meanwhile, Kuoni has retraced his steps to the Frenchman's bedchamber: tricked out in de Savignon's clothes and with de Savignon's hat drawn well over his brows, so as to shade his face, he flings himself into the chair lately occupied by the Marquis—and waits.

Presently the deep-toned bell of St. Oswald's chimes out the hour of midnight; scarce has the vibration of the last stroke died away on the silent night air, when his ear detects another and nearer sound.

He springs up, and turning finds himself confronted by three masked men, standing, sword in hand, by the open window through which they have entered. In an instant he has drawn de Savignon's rapier from its scabbard.

"How now, my masters," he exclaims, mimicking the Frenchman's foreign accent, "what do you seek?"

"The Marquis Henri de Savignon" says one, in a voice which the jester does not recognise.

"I am he," he replies haughtily; "what is your business? Are you robbers or assassins, that you come in this guise and penetrate at such an hour into my bedchamber?"

"We bear you news," says the former speaker, delivering the words after the fashion of a man who is reciting a lesson that he has learnt by heart, "we bear you news that your treason is discovered, and in the King's name we bid you prepare to die."

"A merry jest, gentlemen! An artful story! You are certainly no common footpads, but I fear me there is some slight mistake."

"I give you five minutes, by yonder time-piece, wherein to prepare your soul for the next world."

"It is considerate of you, my masters," retorts Kuoni, the mocking spirit of the jester asserting itself, "but the boon is unrequested, and, by your leave, I trust to have many years yet wherein to carry out your amiable suggestion."

"The man is laughing at us," cries one of the hitherto silent assassins. "Let us end the business!"

His companions seek to detain him, but, going forward in spite of them, he crosses swords with Kuoni.

Seeing him engaged, the other two come forward also, and in a few minutes a terrible fight is raging. There is not, perhaps, in the whole of Sachsenberg a finer swordsman than this lithe and agile jester, but the odds are such as no man may hope to strive against victoriously. Before many minutes have elapsed, one of the assassin's swords has passed through his right breast.

With a groan he sinks forward in a heap, and the sword he lately held bounds with a noisy ring upon the parquet floor.

Hurrying steps are heard outside the room, and presently voices are discernible, as the household, disturbed by the clash of steel and the din of struggle, is hurrying towards De Savignon's room.

One of the assassins is on the point of going forward to make sure of their work, by driving his dagger into the heart of the prostrate man, when, alarmed by the approaching sounds and mindful of their orders not to allow themselves on any account to be taken, the other two drag him off through the window before he can accomplish his design.

"Come," says he who delivered the fatal blow, "he will be dead in a few minutes. That stroke never yet left a man alive."

An instant later the door of the room is burst violently open, and just as the murderers disappear into the night a curious group of half-clad men and women with frightened faces stand awe-stricken on the threshold, gazing at the spectacle before them.

"The Marquis has been slain," cries a voice, which is followed by a woman's shriek, and as the crowd divides, the old, white-haired Count of Lichtenau enters the room followed by his half-fainting daughter.

Together they stand gazing at the body on the floor, and at the dark crimson stain which is slowly spreading about it.

Then suddenly—

"Henri!" shrieks the girl, and rushing forwards, she falls on her knees beside the unconscious Kuoni. Then, as her father gently turns the body over to ascertain the nature of his hurt, another and different cry escapes her. But the jester reviving, and opening his eyes at the sound, meets her gaze and whispers faintly—

"Hush, my lady! do not say that I am not the Marquis. As you value his life, keep silent and let all believe and spread the report that the Marquis is dying."

"What does it mean? what does it mean?" she wails, wringing her hands, yet, with quick instinct, understanding that serious motives have dictated Kuoni's words.

"Send them away—your father also—I will explain," gasps the jester, and at each word he utters the blood wells forth from his wound.

When all have withdrawn, and when she has raised his head and pillowed it in her lap, he tells her *all*, bidding her not to allow the real truth of the matter to transpire until morning.

"And you, YOU, Kuoni, of all men, who have ever seemed to hate him, you have so nobly given your life to buy his safety!" she exclaims.

"No, my lady, I have not," he answers; "I have given my life not for him but for you. I wished to save him because you loved him. And because I wished to spare you the anguish of beholding his dead body, I have changed places with him. *His* life is valuable to someone—mine is worthless."

The girl can find no words wherein to answer fittingly, but her tears are falling fast and they are eloquent to him. She *understands* at last!

"I am so happy," he murmurs presently, "oh, so happy! Had I lived my head would never have been pillowed on your knee. Had I lived, I should never have dared to tell you—as I do now, when in the presence of death all differences of birth and station fade away—that I love you."

The girl trembles violently; then for a second their eyes meet. She were not a woman did her heart not swell with fondness and pity for the poor despised fool, who to ensure her happiness has sacrificed his life.

Growing bold in the dread presence of the Reaper—

"Louisa," he gasps, his voice still fainter than before, "I am dying; there are none to witness, and none will ever know—kiss me!"

Weeping softly, the girl stoops until her loose flowing hair falls about his head and neck, and her lips, so rich with the blood of life and youth, touch *his*, upon which the chill of death is settling.

A quiver runs through his frame, his chest heaves with a long last sigh—then all is still, but for the gentle sobbing of the girl whose tears are falling fast upon the upturned face, which smiles upon her in death.

The Vicomte's Wager

The story of how he made and lost it

Harmsworth Magazine, September 1899

I

To honour the fair sex is the first law of chivalry—a law well under-stood by the gay roysterers seated around the Comte de St. Auban's generous board; for in a few short hours we had paid right loyal homage to woman by toasting every beauty at the court of France, and for that matter at every court of Europe.

I was young then—let this be my excuse—and I fear me I was vain and foolish. At least, I know that my reputation was not quite what a young man's reputation should be.

But on that night at St. Auban's, what little wit the gods had given me must have been smothered in the fumes of wine.

The conversation had assumed a character which I cannot recall in detail, but which had for scope the discussion of woman's beauty—a very fit and proper subject for half a score of idle young fops who knew no occupation save the study of fashion, gallantry and perfumery. I was appealed to for my opinion upon some question of feminine susceptibilities, and, with a boldness derived from much indulgence in the goblet at my elbow, I replied by a loud and lusty boast, that the wo-man was yet unborn that could withstand my personal charms and lover's wiles.

The burst of laughter which greeted this remark, instead of the silent awe to which I deemed it entitled, disconcerted me somewhat; but when

the Chevaler de Brissac, leaning across the table, loudly anounced that he could find a lady who would be no more affected either by my personal beauty or charm of manner, than one of the marble statues in the Louvre, I became angry. Had it not been that de Brissac's fame as a swordsman was apt to make him in a degree respected, and cause one to think twice before saying that to him which would have been unhesitant-ingly said to another, I doubt not but that some smart witticisms would have been exchanged. But I washed down my annoyance with another goblet of Anjou, and sweetly desired him to name this modern Penelope.

"I will pledge her!" he cried, rising to his feet and lifting his glass on high, with fingers that shook ever so lightly. "I drink to the bright eyes of the Marquise de Grandcourt."

It was de règle that we should stand to pledge a lady, and so our chairs were pushed back, and several unsteady pairs of legs supported their owners' bodies, which swayed, some gracefully, some otherwise, as the toast was noisily responded to.

The Marquise de Grandcourt had the reputation of being as heartless as she was beautiful, and many were the ardent wooers whose discomfiture she had encompassed. I remember how upon many occasions, when I had met her at the Louvre, she had been wont to glance disdainfully at my brave apparel, and turn up her perfect nose as if my delicate perfumes of ambre and iris were offensive to her dainty nostrils. And as I remembered this I was inclined to regret the rashness of my boast.

Still, when presently I encountered de Brissac's sardonic smile, and heard him murmur in bantering tones, "Are you satisfied, Vicomte?" I laughed derisively.

"Satisfied? I am satisfied that what I have said is true, and I will prove my words."

"Or eat them," he added. "Chut, Vicomte, I'll wager you a hundred louis that not if you pester her with your scented attentions for a whole year, will you so much obtain her permission to kiss her finger tips."

"Bah!" I laughed, "a hundred louis would not pay the expenses of my wooing."

“If you require tempting, Vicomte,” came St. Auban’s voice from the head of the table, “I will gladly lay you a thousand louis.”

“Done, with you!” I roared, utterly oblivious of the fact that if I were to employ every blandishment I could think of, towards every Hebrew gentleman of my acquaintance, I should not succeed in raising half the sum. “How long will you give me?”

“What say you to three months?”

“Three months!” I echoed, “Do you take me for a clown? I should indeed be a clumsy wooer could I not earn your money in a month.”

“No, no,” replied St. Auban generously, “there is no fairness in the arrangement. You have taken a good deal of wine, Vilmorin, and I think it would be better for me to repeat my proposals tomorrow, when your head is cool.”

“La, la,” I answered, quickly, for the smiling eyes that were turned upon me had aroused my temper, “Undeceive yourself, St. Auban. If you were half as sober as I am you would be less willing to put a thousand louis into my pocket.”

The shout of laughter that applauded my courageous coxcombry well-nigh shook the glasses on the table.

“As you will,” answered St. Auban, “‘tis then a wager that within a month you will have conquered the heart of the Marquise de Grandcourt.”

“Neither in one month nor twenty if I know the lady!” ejaculated de Brissac.

“Say you so, Chevalier?” I cried, springing to my feet, and angered by so much opposition. “Say you so? Then hear my answer. My name is not Camille de Vilmorin, if I do not bring the Marquise de Grandcourt on her knees to me—on her knees, mark you—before I am a month older. And failing to do so, I shall forfeit a thousand louis!”

With that I sat down amidst the wild vociferations of the assembled company, and emptied my newly filled bumper to quench the thirst which my vigorous speech had excited.

II

With an aching head and a sluggish mind did I set about recalling, next day, what had been said and done at the Comte de St. Auban's supper-table. But the memory of the whole evening was as blurred and confused as a quickly revolving wheel of many colours.

One thing, however, stood clearly defined before me, and sent a stab of regret through my heart—my drunken wager.

Misunderstand me not. I would scorn to appear before you in false colours, for, whatever may have been my sins, I never was a hypocrite, nor do I wish to be one now. My honour was not father to my regret, as it should have been. Like many of those who prate loudly of honour, and make it their most sacred oath, it seems to me now that I but understood the practice of that virtue dimly. My regret was born of a fear that I should fail to win my wager, and be called an idle boaster.

I met St. Auban and de Brissac at the levée in the Louvre that morning, and they smilingly inquired whether I had yet paid my addresses to the Marquise. My answer lacked much of that suave flippancy which I affected, and was unaccompanied by my wonted laugh.

It must have been my brusqueness upon this occasion which gave rise to the rumour amongst those who, having been present at St. Auban's supper-table, were privy to the wager—the affair was kept amomgst us in the profoundest secrecy—that I had no intention of pay-ing court to the lady, or, in fact, of approaching her.

When I heard of this, two days later, my dormant energies were aroused, and, as ready money was an uncommonly absent commodity, I must perforce set to work without further dallying to bring the Marquise a-kneeling before me, or else resign myself to the sale of my horses and jewelry.

As a Vicomte de Vilmorin would cut but a sorry figure in the world without these accessories, the sacrifice was not to be thought of.

Therefore I set about discovering what manner of man the Marquise would consider as at all approaching her ideal. I soon gathered that if this living icicle had any penchant towards the opposite sex, it was for soldiers

and warlike men. I winced at the information, for such men, in my estimation, always reeked of leather, and were prone to brusque, unseemly manners, which I had no stomach for emulating. That thousand louis, however, danced before my eyes like a tormenting sprite, and must be conquered.

I looked about me for a sombre suit that might have escaped the scent bottle, but, not finding any such within my wardrobe, I was forced to visit a tailor whom I honoured with my patronage, and who, in virtue of my handsome figure, was not too pressing in his demands for pay-ment.

This commodious threader of needles sent me out into the world garbed in a sombre suit of velvet with silver lace, over which I buckled on a baldrick of embossed black leather, bearing a bronze-hilted rapier, of prodigious length, in a leathern scabbard.

Imagine me—whose baldricks had ever been of gaily coloured and richly embroidered silks, whose sword had been more hilt than blade, and all ablaze with jewels—thus fashioned, like some moping night bird, or some canting, moral-mongering follower of the English puritan Cromwell.

Nor was that all; for when, at home, I surveyed my appearance critically before a mirror, I cursed the smooth skin and meek expression of my girlish face, and, having got a servant to bring me a hot iron, I attempted, by an upward curling of my moustachios, to give them a warlike, bristling look, which might add ferocity to my otherwise gentle beauty.

When that was done, and I had pressed upon my locks a tall-crowned hat decorated by a single feather, I sallied forth a-wooing. And de Brissac, whom I met as I went, and who knew me not at the first glance, seeing me—the gay, roystering Vilmorin—thus spurred and booted, and begirt with such a sword, puffed out his cheeks in wonder, and asked me what adversary I was going to meet.

"There is no duel afoot," I answered, in stiff accents, born of the dignity borrowed from my raiment; "I am about to visit the Marquise."

"Then, by the Mass," he cried, eyeing me from hat to spurs in a sardonic fashion, "why come you not armed back and breast?"

But, heeding not his sarcastic allusion to my apparel, nor his parting request that I should present his compliments to the Marquise, I hurried on.

I found the lady whose favour had an intrinsic value for me surrounded by a group of lisping gallants, whom, but a few hours back, my finery would have extinguished wholly. As it was, they looked askance at me, and some who knew me marvelled greatly, no doubt, at the change which had been wrought, whilst some who knew me not eyed me in a supercilious fashion, as I might eye a lacquey.

But I threw back their scornful glances, and, clanking my scab-bard, drew their attention to the length of my rapier, with a significance which they could not misinterpret, as I elbowed my way to the Marquise, to whom I made my courtliest bow.

"Monsieur le Vicomte," she murmured, when I had announced myself, "I cannot clearly recollect you. Is it long since last we met?"

"Some little time," I answered suavely, remembering that it was exactly a week, and praying to heaven that she might not remember it too.

We entered upon an interesting conversation, and it was not long ere I realised how well-advised I had been to clothe myself with such sobriety. For soon those gilded, lisping fops who stood about us began to move away, until at last the beautiful and greatly courted Marquise de Grandcourt and the warlike Vilmorin were left alone.

We discussed the men that filled the room, and, having ascertained that I was not likely to be overheard by any of my acquaintances, I launched forth upon a vigorous abuse of their effeminate dress and manners, whereat her glorious eyes sparkled with enthusiasm for a subject which, I soon discovered, she was herself never tired of expounding.

When I arose, at the end of an hour, "It does one good to see such a man," she said, "in these days of scented puppets."

And as I bent over her shapely hand, so white and slender, she murmured a wish that we might meet again—a wish that, for obvious reasons, found a fervent echo in my heart.

III

Such was the commencement of my courtship. And for a week it continued more or less as it had begun, save that each day my tongue shaped bolder words and my eyes more ardent glances, until the Marquise could have no doubt but that it was to her that my court was paid each time I visited the Louvre, and not to His Majesty.

It was then that, deeming matters to have gone far enough in this fashion, I bethought me to fill her boudoir with flowers, and letters couched in tender language, which, strange to tell, were all returned to me.

This set me pondering, and I concluded that perchance the Marquise, being a lady of exalted and fastidious tastes, cared not to be wooed in prose. So I hired me a poet, who wrote me odes and sonnets by the score, which I sent along with my floral offerings.

But here again no better fortune met me; for, like the prose, the verses too were returned.

I cast about me for some new means through which to show her my devotion, and hit upon the idea of engaging some minstrels then performing at Court to serenade her. I paid them well, and bid them do their best. But either they ignored my injunctions, or else the lady had no more stomach for serenades by night than for elegant prose and tender verse by day; for of the three I sent, but one returned—and he with a broken head—to tell me that they had been set upon by her ladyship's servants, and that his companions had been carried home on shutters.

He cursed me roundly, and called me some names, which, out of pity for the fellow's lack of manners, I withhold. Suffice it to say that it cost me fifty louis—twenty-five of which I borrowed from a friendly Jew—to pacify him.

That night I slept but ill, for it seemed that my courtship took not a favourable turn, and as my busy thoughts were searching means wherein to mend affairs, they banished sleep.

But in those waking hours I determined upon a plan which must perforce succeed, and in accordance with which I boldly visited the

Marquise upon the following day. I chose an early hour whereat she would have no visitors, and therein I was successful, for I found her alone and in a gracious mood.

I chided her gently for having treated my messengers with such scant compliment, whereat she looked regretful and cast down her eyes.

Noting my advantage, and deeming the citadel of her heart now ripe for storming, I knelt to her—as I had knelt to a score of women before her—and told her, in words that from much repetition had acquired an eloquent fluency, how deeply I loved—I who had never known before what it was to love.

She heard me through with a gentle hanging of her lovely head—a symptom which, experience told me, should augur well—and when for very want of breath I stopped, she laughed in tones that made me wonder had the long-concealed passion which she had fostered for me turned her head.

Thinking it must be so, and hearing already the chink of St. Auban's gold pieces in my pocket, I sprang joyfully to my feet, and, catching her round the waist, I awoke the echoes of the room with the sound of a hearty kiss.

Were I to live a hundred years, I shall still remember the change that came over her face, from which all colour fled, and the terrible look that flashed upon me from her eyes.

I liked it not, and, scenting danger, I became suddenly aware that it had grown late, and that I had an appointment at noon, which must perforce be kept.

I looked about me for my hat, and, having found it, I made shift to go, when suddenly she broke the painful, uncanny silence.

"Tarry a moment, monsieur," she cried, and methought her eyes had taken fire. "Tarry a moment, I am loth to part with you!"

Had I heard her aright? Did she desire my company, and were these signs of impending storm but affected, so that—womanlike—she might conceal her joy? Thinking it must be so, "I am your slave," I murmured, with a gallant bow, "your humble slave, Marquise. Command me as you will, and those others may wait."

She laughed curiously, and her eyes wandered towards a riding whip which lay at hand, and which had I seen betimes, mayhap I should have been more prudent.

"You have given me something, Monsieur," she said, "and as it hurts me to remain a debtor, I will give you something in return."

In vain did I protest that what I had given her was of no consequence, and required no payment. She was of a different mind.

"I will call again, Marquise," I exclaimed, "you can repay me then." And, knowing full well what was in store for me did I tarry, I stalked towards the door.

But she forestalled me, and barred my passage, whip in hand.

Seeing how matters stood, and having no illusions left, I deemed it best to grow dignified.

"I trust, madame," I ventured in my gentlest tones, fearing to arouse her anger further by any too great a show of firmness, "I trust that you will remember that I am a gentleman."

"I never knew it, sir," she thundered back, in withering accents, "and from what I know of you, I can but remember that you are a knave."

Had I lived to be knaved by a woman? Mordieu! she carried her jests somewhat far!

"Let me pass, madame," I exclaimed angrily, advancing towards her as I spoke.

But her hand went up, and the threatening whip checked my progress of a sudden. I deemed it best to effect a compromise.

"I assure you, Marquise—" I began; but she cut me short.

"I need no assurances from you, monsieur. You imagined that I was your dupe when first you came to me, tricked out in warlike feathers. You imagine that I scented not the coxcomb they masked—The roué, Vicomte de Vilmorin. How dull you were!"

And here again her laughter jarred upon my nerves.

"Deeming that you had made a deep impression, and that you had an easy conquest, you pestered me with your letters and your poems, and, lastly, with your musicians. Nor did you take warning when your offerings were returned, and your musicians carried hence with broken heads; but you must come here, to me, to offer me this crowning insult! You hound!"

And with that gentle apostrophe her whip came down about my shoulders, causing me to regret that I had not come to do my wooing arrayed in back and breast, as de Brissac had suggested.

This was a disillusionment! And, mordieu! what an arm she had; and yet, how beautiful she was!

Had I witnessed her thus chastising another I might have bent admiring eyes upon her; as it was, I withdrew into an angle of the chamber, so as to present as little surface as possible to her vindictive lash.

Huddled up in my corner, I shrilly denounced her as a coward.

But my loquacity only served to arouse her shrewish temper further, for, seizing me by the collar of my doublet, she dragged me forth from my shelter into the middle of the room, and there, despite my groans of pain and my entreaties, she did so mercilessly belabour me that the memory of it sets me writhing even now.

And when at last she paused, exhausted, and I, crushed alike in body and in soul, sank down upon the floor, a mass of aching bruises, she bent over me to whisper in my ear a piece of sound advice—"Next time your fancy leads you into a drunken wager, see that there be no listening servants."

How I reached home it matters not. Suffice it that by the aid of some kind soul I was enabled to crawl into my bed-chamber an hour or so after my interview with that fury in female form.

I penned a note to Monsieur de St. Auban, begging him to hold me excused from the revels he was holding that night, and alleging that a fall from my horse had injured me somewhat painfully.

I will not offend the nice sense of my readers by a recital of the humiliations that were put upon me by my erstwhile boon companions. Needless to say, I was too much the gentleman to smirch the fair name of the Marquise by recounting the story of her outrageous conduct to-wards me. But, despite my own reticence, the thing was known all over Paris the next day.

That gay city seemed to grow suddenly dull and uninteresting to me, and, after paying St. Auban in full, I deemed it best to leave court—at least for a while.

I have since lived the peaceful life of a country gentleman, which somehow seems to suit me better than the vicissitudes of a roysterer's career, and the consequence attendant on it.

The Curate and the Actress

The Royal Magazine, November 1899

When I mention that Andrew Barrington was a saint, it is almost unnecessary for me to add that he had no pretentions to that emptiest of empty titles, "A Man of the World," for it is already an established and recognised fact that Sanctity is a quality not generally reckoned among the many accomplishments of such.

To thoroughly avoid evil it is necessary to be on intimate terms with it, and where a hardened sinner would have triflingly withstood its onslaught, the Reverend Andrew Barrington was conquered and laid by the heels, despite his armour of piety and virtue, on the strength of which he had reckoned over confidently.

Now, when Andrew's landlady diffidently mentioned that a young lady of the theatrical profession had taken rooms, for a month or so, in her house, a man of the world would have said to himself, "Let us have a look at her." He would have availed himself of the first opportunity to submit the lady to his critical eye, remarking perhaps, "not bad," and then his blase spirit would have been at rest, and he would have thought of her no more.

But Andrew's mode of procedure was unfortunately a less wise, and, despite his sanctity, a less exemplary one.

He grew red in the face when the news was brought to him and worried over the event for two entire days—and the better part of two nights, which resulted in a certain pallor and seedy appearance settling upon his countenance, such as slanderous tongues—if there were any in the world—might set down to dissipation.

To have a woman, and a young one to wit, sharing the same roof was evil enough; but that this woman should be an actress!—a saintly shudder ran through his slender young frame at the mere thought, and for forty-eight consecutive hours he dared not venture forth lest he should chance upon this vulgar painted female, with straw-coloured hair and pencilled lashes, of whom he had caught a glimpse through the window on the day following upon that of her arrival.

He had been glad to come to Stollbridge, for it promised him freedom to pursue his studies in peace, and away from the world; and here, upon his retreat, the fates had flung a very substantial sample of that world which he sought to be rid of for a while.

For two whole days he revolved the painful matter in his mind, with the obvious result that when he awoke upon the third morning after the lady's advent, he was firmly resolved upon setting out that day in quest of new and uncontaminated quarters for his meditations.

His manner was scarcely genial when he apprised Mrs. Jones of his determination, but there are bounds even to the endurance of a curate, and there are times when a little s warmth of expression maybe justifyable in him.

His landlady was disconsolate, and a corner of her apron was called into requisition as an illustration of her grief and an ally to her protestations, but Andrew was obdurate.

"It was unkind of you, Mrs. Jones," he said, "to have done this. Moreover, it was injudicious and unbusinesslike—for seeing that there was every possibility of my remaining with you for the next year, I think that I might have been consulted before this er—ahem—lady"—and the saint's tones grew actually sarcastic over the word—"was admitted to the same house for a single month."

"I didn't know, sir, as you'd object!" whimpered the landlady.

The silent look which the curate bestowed upon her in reply contained more eloquence than could be found in all the orations of Cicero, and the manner in which he slammed the door after his departing self told of a resolve that no living thing could alter.

He walked down to the office of the biweekly, Stollbridge Chronicle, and, having handed in an advertisement, wherein he vain-gloriously

announced himself as a young gentleman of quiet and studious habits, he set off at a brisk pace towards the river.

He hired a boat and was soon speeding up-stream, propelled by long sweeping strokes that belied the apparent frailty of his slender figure.

Having sculled himself into a perspiration and into a quiet back-water, he tied the painter to the trunk of a tree, and stretching himself in the bottom of the boat, he produced a calf-bound copy of Hyland's "Advanced Psychology," and was soon lost in its metaphysical depths to the world in general and the haunting idea of the yellow-haired actress in particular.

"Excuse me, sir," said a sweet, melodious voice, breaking in upon Andrew's studies and dragging him from the dry abstract into a very interesting study of the concrete, "but could you direct me to Stollbridge?"

The young man's head went half-way round his Roman collar, and his eyes opened very wide, the better to behold the charming apparition standing on the bank close by, in a half-timid, half-respectful attitude.

So ecstatic was his admiration that he forgot to answer her quest-ion until she repeated it, whereupon he blushed like a girl and removed his hat.

"I know a short cut,"' he replied, "but if you are unacquainted with the country, I should advise you to keep to the river."

"Thank you. Is it far?"

"About four miles."

The girl gave a little frightened gasp. "Four miles," she echoed, "why it will be dusk before I get there. How annoying! This comes of exploring a country."

"Have you walked far?" he ventured timidly.

"Far! " she exclaimed, "I must have walked miles. I left Stollbridge at eleven this morning intending to visit Calvert Hall; I was told that there was a short cut across the fields which reduced the distance to two miles; I attempted to follow out the minute directions which I had received with the result that I lost myself hopelessly, and have been wandering about ever since."

“Dear me!” ejaculated Andrew, then added brilliantly, “You must be tired!”

“I should think I am,” she answered; “wouldn’t you be?”

Andrew confessed that such a contingency was probable, and then for a moment he pondered over something that had come into his mind. He noted that she was young, that she was very pretty, and very ladylike, both in dress and manner and this observation troubled him not a little. Had she been elderly or unattractive, his duty would have been clear to him. As it was—

He brought his reasoning to an abrupt termination by offering timidly to take her back to Stollbridge in his boat.

She hesitated at first, looked demure, and spoke of troubling and of not knowing him, but ended by accepting his invitation.

Of course, it could not be expected that these two would travel over those four miles of tranquil river in silence. They chatted affably, and the girl even displayed a certain spirit of innocent badinage which played sad havoc with Andrew’s nerves.

He noticed that her eyes were dark and large, and had a trick of opening wide at times like those of a puzzled child; that her hair was of a bright auburn; that her complexion was as delicate as that of a peach; that her mouth was small and sensitive; and that her figure, although petite, was well proportioned. By the time they had travelled a mile, it occurred to the curate that there was no reason why he should fatigue himself by over-vigorous sculling. They would reach Stollbridge quite soon enough. Of course, he told himself that it was not of the least consequence when they arrived, but down in his heart of hearts he knew that he was not telling himself exactly the truth, for—well—she was very pretty, and fresh, and innocent, and he was very young. “You are of course a visitor at Stollbridge?” he inquired presently, and he actually began to fear the conversational powers that he was displaying.

“Oh yes,” she replied frankly, “I am only here for three or four weeks.”

Andrew was burning to ask her how much of the three or four weeks might still be left, but he thought the question too bold, so, with a sigh, he stifled it and grew silent.

“Do you often come on the river?” the girl inquired after a pause.

“Almost every day, when it is fine.”

“And do you often pity ladies who have lost their way and take them back to Stollbridge in your boat?”

“I?” he ejaculated in accents of the profoundest horror. “I—I assure you that I do not!”

“What a pity!” she answered archly.

Andrew felt uncomfortable as the suspicion arose in his mind that, despite his cloth, she was amusing herself at his expense and he muttered something about understanding why the circumstance should be a lamentable one.

It was not until he had assisted her out of the boat at Stollbridge that she made her meaning clear to him.

“If it were a regular practice of yours,” she said, and her eyes had a mischievous look in them like those of a kitten at play, “I might be tempted soon to lose myself again, for I never enjoyed the river so much as this evening. I wonder why?”

Andrew blushed up to the roots of his hair, and deemed her innocent outspokeness very embarrassing. Then, for the first time in his life, he became guilty of a gallant speech.

“No more have I,” he replied in a whisper—for his sanctity was afraid that the innocent-looking boatman might have ears like other people—”and if you should contrive to lose yourself again—well—I should be happy to find you.”

He realised that he had expressed himself clumsily, and yet he felt that he ought rather to be ashamed of his boldness. But then, as I have said already, he was very young, and she was very sweet and she had very wonderful eyes. Those eyes haunted him as he walked home alone, and he told himself a dozen times that he was a churl for not having seen her to the door of her dwelling in spite of her remonstrances.

For the next four days it rained almost incessantly, which kept Andrew indoors. Moreover, he was busy packing his belongings, for he had found suitable rooms near at hand, and he was preparing to move into them; this he eventually did, on the fifth day after his adventure.

He came across the lady with the straw-coloured hair once or twice before he left his old quarters, and his eyes scarcely contained upon such occasions that sympathetic benevolence which is supposed to be characteristic of churchmen.

At last he was installed in his new rooms, unpolluted by the presence of any painted ballet girl—for thus he now defined her.

The next day was Sunday, and, as principle forbade him from boating on that day of pious indolence, he was out of humour. He was especially concerned at not seeing his fair unknown in church, and at a loss how to account for her absence. But on the Monday, the weather being fine, he went out again and sculled himself into the same shady backwater by the old mill. Only he left his psychological volume behind him this time, and spent two solid hours watching the horizon and thinking of her lovely eyes. He was just beginning to despair, when suddenly the silence was broken by a voice, which, although he had heard it but once, was deeply graven on his memory.

"Please, sir, could you direct me to Stollbridge?"

He looked round to meet her laughing eyes, and laughing in return with pleasure and amusement, he rose as on the former occasion, to hand her into the boat.

And so it fell out that every day at about the same hour the syren's voice would come to ask the saint to show her the way to Stollbridge, until one day matters grew so bad that the Rev. Andrew Barrington actually allowed it to escape him, that he should be delighted not only to take her as far as Stollbridge but a very considerable distance further.

As a matter of fact Andrew was in love and out of his senses, as a good many more young men have been, when too constantly thrown into the company of an attractive morsel of unchaperoned femininity.

And who can blame him? He was an idealist, and here, in Miss Ellialine de Vaud—for so she had told him that she was named—he had found the incarnation of his ideal.

She was too innocent to understand the curate's gentle metaphor about a longer journey than that to Stollbridge, so she merely smiled and, taking him literally, told him that if he liked he might scull her upstream

as far as Widenham. And he had not the courage at the moment to put his metaphor into plainer language.

All this went on for the better part of a fortnight (during which the curate's studies and meditations were severely neglected) until at last the vicar, who was an intimate, although somewhat paternal friend of Andrew's, thought fit to administer a gentle remonstrance.

But Andrew flew as near a temper as his sanctity—rather rusty of late—would allow, and he told the vicar in plain and very much unvarnished language that he was quite old enough to choose his own companions.

"Yes, yes," replied the vicar, absorbing some of the heat which Andrew was giving out, "but it isn't that! A certain amount of example is expected from us, you know, and—well—you go out boating every day by yourself and come back accompanied, and—of course people are beginning to talk, which is very distressing!"

For a moment Andrew's sanctity deserted him wholly and the Evil One took possession of his heart, for bringing his fist down upon the table with unmistakable vehemence, he very roundly told the vicar that people might go to the devil.

The vicar's face was as interesting as a kaleidoscope at this unexpected rejoinder, and the tone in which he pointed out to Andrew that it was the earthly mission of the clergy to direct people in quite the opposite direction savoured strongly of pity.

Then he took up his hat and umbrella and with a sorrowful shake of the head, he sighingly wished Andrew good day and left him.

The saint was furious. "How dare the insidious world talk of me and my movements?" he asked himself indignantly. "And to think that even so right-minded a man as the vicar should be affected by what he heard!"

If he had been a man of the world, Andrew might have been justified in competing for a prominent place in the history of profane utterance—as it was, he could only do some remarkably strong thinking. The result was that half-an-hour later he was tearing down towards the river with a speed born of righteous indignation, and a burning desire to set matters right once and for all time.

Yes; it was the only thing to do. He was fortunately the possessor of a nice private income which would allow him to live in blissful independence, and he was determined upon asking Miss de Vaud to take him and his money to church, and marry the lot.

He found her, sitting on the grass, and looking demure in a white dress and a sailor hat—Madonna-like he thought her.

With an original comment upon the heat of the sun and the clearness of the sky, he assisted her into the boat—she accomplishing the embarkation with the orthodox display of ankle—and arranged her cushions with something more than his wonted solicitude.

Then, taking the oars again, he pulled vigorously away in the direction of Widenham. He had in his mind a certain picturesque bower formed by the overhanging boughs of a beech tree, and beneath the generous shade of this, it was his purpose to call a halt and broach the delicate subject. He could do nothing but think of what he should say—and never did a sermon give him half the trouble and anxiety—so that naturally he was strangely silent and preoccupied.

She endured this for a while; but when she had asked him for the third time whether he felt the heat, and he had answered her with a fatuous smile that he thought them very charming indeed, she deemed it time to awaken him. So giving the right rope a vicious tug, she skillfully steered him into a hawthorn bush, which, if not in bloom, was very amply in thorn—a circumstance which he appreciated, without the aid of his eyes.

As he pushed the boat back, he remarked with a sweet smile, which made his scratches bleed, that it did not signify in the least. Then a bold idea entered his mind—evoked by memories of a novel or two read in those sinful days of his boyhood—and in words which if slightly lacking in veracity, were certainly rich in poetry and fervour, he protest-ed that for her sake he would gladly shed every drop of blood in his veins. In fact, he almost appeared to suggest that blood had been given him for no other purpose.

She blushed in the most highly approved fashion, and applied herself to a careful study of her tan shoes. Noticing this favourable sign, and finding the ice fairly broken, Andrew left the nose of the boat in the hawthorn bush where it had caught, forgot the bower half a mile further

up the river, and started forthwith upon the accelerated display of amorous rhetoric.

Pale and gasping, with thumping heart and twitching hands he told his story; now halting and stammering, now plunging headlong into a torrent of verbiage and incoherence.

And she, while contemplating the pattern of her dainty shoe, dimly realised that he was asking her to become his wife. And having guessed, her heart began to beat. Not so much out of sympathy as out of dread lest he should capsize the boat before he had finished.

At last he stopped, and signified by mopping the perspiration from his forehead and the blood from his cheeks, that he had finished.

A crafty and designing woman of the world would no doubt have commented upon the suddenness of the proposal. The simple unsophisticated child before him did otherwise. Raising for a moment her soft dark eyes, and favouring him with a glance half coy half tender—

"I am so happy, Andrew," she murmured, "so happy!"

The enraptured lover would have fallen upon his knees had he not remembered in time the disastrous results which might follow upon so rash an act. He had to content himself with stretching across the boat and seizing the hand she half extended towards him.

"You love me? You really love me?" the poor boy whispered incredulously.

"More than I can tell you," she answered, casting down her eyes. Upon this followed many touching words, many sighs and many impassioned glances. But the sun will set, in spite of lovers, and presently with one more sigh, Andrew was obliged to release the boat from the bush and turn his way homewards.

He was more eager than ever to see her home, when they had landed at Stollbridge. But she insisted upon going alone, and despite his remonstrances and expressions of contempt for public opinion, alone she went.

Notwithstanding this, as Andrew Barrington made his way home, he felt himself indeed a happy man, and many were the thoughts of pleasant anticipation he bestowed upon the morrow. But the morrow

brought him a perfumed note containing a disappointment. She had been suddenly called to town, she wrote, by a telegram which informed her that her dear Aunt was dangerously ill. Would he write?

He put the note down on the table. Then snatched it up, and blushing furiously be crumpled it into his pocket as the maid-of-all-work entered with his breakfast tray.

He felt better when she had gone and began to think. He drew her note from his pocket and read it again. At the word "Aunt" he came to a full stop. It suggested a family. And with the suggestion came a sickening dread that her people—whoever they might be—should oppose their union. The anxiety was too awful to be borne. He must do something. Again his eye fell upon the note. "Will you write?" Yes, he would write at once. He got the necessary materials together, and, sitting down, he pondered deeply for perhaps half an hour. At last with a sigh he took up the pen and began. He worked assiduously for an hour, and the contents of his waste paper basket grew steadily during that time. But in the end his critical spirit was satisfied, and he appended his signature to one of the most richly tinted flowers of rhetoric that ever bloomed between the leaves of a parson's blotting-pad. What he had written might have been summed up concisely into three sentences. "I love you. I shall never love anyone else. If your parents forbid our marriage I shall be disconsolate."

But, as everyone versed in such matters must know, these three sentences afford very considerable scope for elaboration. It need not, therefore, cause great surprise that by a zealous regard for detail, Andrew was enabled to cover eight pages of notepaper with closely-written matter. Although there may be many who could do better, still, for a saint, Andrew did very well.

The reply came promptly, and set him in a fever of delight. She had no parents, and therefore no wishes but her own to consult. Her Aunt was better, and she hoped to return to Stollbridge in a day or two. She loved him, and she trusted that he was devoting a little of his thoughts to her. Then came the signature "Ella"—a name which Andrew kept uttering aloud, until the maid-of-all-work disgusted him into silence by putting her head into the room and inquiring whether he had called her.

Ella would return in a day or two! And here again those novels read in early youth came to his aid, and he remembered what was expected of him. He had no time to lose, he must run up to town at once and buy the ring.

He put his hat on—a trifle jauntily for a saint—and went round to the vicarage to obtain his superior's sanction of the journey.

He had not seen the vicar since their somewhat unhappy parting of some three days ago, and it was not without a certain restlessness of mind that he entered the presence of that worthy man. The Reverend Mr. Ritson turned from the papers with which he had been occupied, to greet Andrew.

He was a man of medium height, with iron-grey hair and a rosy clean-shaven face. The levity suggested by a slight upward tilt of his nose was redeemed by the portly dignity of his figure.

"Ah, good morning, Andrew. Won't you sit down?"

Andrew sat down and dangled his hat between his knees in a nervous fashion. "I have come to ask you whether it would be inconvenient if I were to run up to town for a day or two."

"Certainly not," the vicar answered with a kindly smile. "Go by all means if you—"

Mr. Ritson stopped abruptly, and the smile died from his good-humoured lips. He suddenly remembered having learnt that Miss de Vaud had left Stollbridge two days ago. He was a man of some insight and some worldly experience, and the conclusion he arrived at by a simple process of deduction, was not flattering to Andrew. He turned his clear hazel eyes sternly upon the young man.

"Might I inquire, " he said coldly, "what your motives are for going to London?"

"I was about to tell you, Sir."

"Oh!" The vicar concluded from this disposition to confess, that his apprehensions were certainly unfounded and he hastened to relax the rigorous position of his facial muscles, being anxious to make up in kindness to Andrew for the slight his imagination had for a moment cast upon the young man.

“You see, Mr. Ritson, I was twenty-four years of age I last birthday. And—and—I have been thinking about getting married.” The vicar raised his eyebrows in surprise, and passing his hands under his coat tails, smiled again.

“You are thinking of marrying! Ah, well, well—a very praisewothy resolution.”

Being a bachelor, the vicar was in a position to make an assertion of this character without any qualms regarding its veracity.

Andrew gathered courage from the words and explained the motive of his visit to London.

“Of course, of course,” the vicar agreed, “but you haven’t said anything about the lady of your choice, yet. Come, what is she like? One of my parishioners?”

Andrew remembered their last conversation, and grew distinctly nervous.

“I think you know her, sir,” he answered, “I had the misfortune to disagree with you the other day, about the conversational topic I was affording Stollbridge. I have decided to set matters right by marrying Miss de Vaud, whom I very dearly—for whom I have a very deep regard.”

The vicar did not say much. But what he did say was pregnant with meaning of an eminently discourteous and even sinister character.

“But—but,” stammered Andrew, “I don’t understand.”

“Great Heavens, sir,” Mr. Ritson interrupted. “Have you taken leave of your senses, or has this woman ensnared you into—”

“Sir!” cried Andrew, rising indignant, and confronting him.

The vicar looked at him for a moment, then shook his head sorrowfully.

“So? It’s so bad as all that, is it?” he murmured. “Well, well, I’m sorry for you, Andrew—you are a young man of great promise. But—think it over carefully, and come to me again.”

“My mind is quite made up, sir.”

“Yes, but it may change. I hope it will, for although it would give me very great pain, if you persist in your mad intention of marrying an actress—”

“Marrying a WHAT?” ejaculated Andrew.

“An actress, I said.”

Andrew laughed curiously. “There is some misunderstanding, I didn’t mention an actress.”

He uttered the word “actress,” as if it were an improper expression which contaminated his saintly tongue. Mr. Ritson gazed at the young man in undisguised amazement, and began to entertain a very deep concern anent his sanity.

“Did you, or did you not say that you were going to marry Miss de Vaud; Miss Elialine de Vaud; to make myself plainer still—the Miss Ellaline de Vaud with whom you have been philandering on the river, much to every right-minded person’s disgust?”

Andrew might have taken objection at another time to the impropriety of the word “philandering.” But the season was inopportune for any subtle diagnosis of English vocables. He merely allowed his parched lips to murmur an assent.

“Well then—” the vicar stopped abruptly, as new light broke in upon his mind.

“Do you mean to tell me that you did not know she was an actress? That she was the very woman on whose account you changed your rooms?”

Andrew gasped beneath the load of this revelation. He glanced wildly about him, and out through the window. Someone passing at that moment riveted his attention. Springing across the room, he drew aside the curtains.

“Who’s that?” he asked excitedly.

The vicar looked out and beheld a woman crossing the road. She wore a gown of prismatic hues and her hair was of a golden yellow.

“That, I believe,” he answered slowly, “is Miss de Vaud’s maid, or dresser, or whatever they call such creatures.”

“It is the woman I fled from—I understand it all now.” And dropping into a chair, Andrew mopped his face.

Mr. Ritson laid his hand kindly upon the young man’s shoulder, and sought to console him.

"Fortunately there is no real harm done, Andrew," he said presently. "I suppose you have not written to her?"

"Oh, but I have," cried Andrew wringing his hands. "And such a letter."

"Good Heavens, man! Oh, Andrew, how could you? Think—think of the disgrace to the cloth if this designing woman drags you into a breach of promise action!"

Andrew groaned, and the vicar—being unable to think of anything more appropriate—groaned to keep him company.

A week went by without any fresh developments, saving the departure of the maid, which, the vicar contended, was a sign that Miss de Vaud was not returning to Stollbridge. Andrew received two letters from her. The first was a passionate appeal to his affections and a gentle chiding for his silence. He almost wept over it—and had not the vicar intervened in time, he might have gone the length of answering it.

The second one, which came four days later, was somewhat abusive, and contained a veiled menace. Andrew wept no more—he perspired.

Then another week followed, during which the poor errant saint lived day and night in a torture of apprehension.

His health was threatening to give way when at last the gods saw fit to turn their thumbs up, and his suspense was ended.

The vicar was the first to bring him the joyful and unexpected tidings that Miss de Vaud was Miss de Vaud no longer. She was married. Yes there was no doubt about it. Andrew read the announcement himself in the Telegraph, and the brief sketch of her career which was now supposed to have terminated.

He was able to smile, and to feel very thankful at his escape. The same day a letter bearing the London post-mark and in a familiar hand-writing was delivered to him. It ran:—

"You will no doubt have learnt before this reaches you of the marriage of that woman for whom you professed such deep and lasting affection, and whom you were horrified afterwards to learn—as I gather from your silence—was nothing more than a designing, wicked actress. I am sorry if I have wounded your vanity or your heart, but I could not

withstand the temptation of testing the mettle of the young curate who fled in pious horror from under the roof which had the misfortune to shelter an actress. I hope that I have succeeded in proving to you at least that the horror you felt was only inspired by a word, and that after all an actress may still be sufficiently a woman to cause even a saint to come down from his pedestal and woo her."

She concluded by informing him that she had told her husband everything there was to tell concerning their "flirtation"—he gnashed his teeth at the word—and she enclosed the passionate letter which he had written her and for which she had no further use.

He had not the courage to read his own letter over again. But he took the immediate precaution of burning the two epistles in the same fire.

He has since become an ardent advocate of the celibacy of the clergy, and a trite aphorism which he is never tired of uttering is that appearances are extremely deceptive.

Sword and Mitre

Royal Magazine, December 1899

I

The Marquis de Castelroc stood smiling before me, and in his outstretched hand he held the appointment which, unsolicited, and even against my wishes, he had obtained for me in Lorraine.

For some moments I remained dumfounded by what I accounted a liberty which he had no right to take, and yet, imagining that feelings of kindly interest had dictated it, I had not the heart to appear resentful.

At length I broke the painful silence.

"Monsieur is extremely kind," I murmured, bowing; "but as I told you a week ago, when first you suggested this appointment to me, I cannot and will not accept it; nor can I fathom your motives for thus pressing it upon me."

The smile faded from his handsome, roué face, and the hard lines which characterized his mouth when in repose reappeared.

"You refuse it?" he inquired, and his voice had lost all that persuasive gentleness of a moment ago.

"I regret that I cannot accept it," I replied.

He dropped the parchment on to the table, and going over to the fireplace, leaned his elbow on the overmantel. With his gaze fixed on the ormolu clock, he appeared lost in thoughts of no pleasant character, to judge by the expression of his face.

I endured the ensuing silence for some moments; then, growing weary, and remembering a pair of bright eyes that were watching for my arrival in the Rue du Bac, I coughed to remind him of my presence.

He started at the sound; then turning, came slowly across to where I stood. Leaning lightly against the secretaire of carved oak, and laying a shapely hand, all ablaze with jewels, upon my shoulder, he gazed intently at me for a moment with those uncanny eyes of his.

"You are still a very young man, M. de Bleville," he began.

"Pardon me," I interrupted, impatiently; "but I was twenty-four last birthday."

"A great age," he sneered lightly; then quickly changing his tone as if he feared to offend me, "I speak comparatively," he continued. "You are young when compared with me, who am old enough to be your father. Youth, mon cher vicomte, is rash, and often does not recognize those things which would revert to its own advantage. Now, I mean you well."

"I doubt it not, monsieur."

"I mean you well and take more interest in you than you think. I have noticed that you are growing pale of late; the air of Paris does not agree with you, and a change would benefit you vastly."

"I thank you, but I am feeling passing well," I answered with some warmth.

"Still," he persisted, puckering his brows, "not so well as a young man of your years should do. Lorraine is a particularly healthy country. You will take the appointment."

"A plague on the appointment!" I exclaimed, unable longer to restrain the anger which his impertinence excited. "I do not want it! Do you not understand me, sir? *Notre Dame*! But your persistence grows wearisome. Permit me to bid you good night; I have a pressing matter to attend."

So saying, I reached out for my hat which lay on the table beside the lighted tapers. But he caught my arm in his hand with a grip that made me wince.

"Not yet, vicomte!" he cried huskily. "I take too great an interest in you to let you go thus. We must understand each other first."

His pale face had an evil scowl, and his voice a ring of mockery little to my taste.

"Your life is in danger, monsieur," he said presently; "and if you persist in your determination to remain in Paris, evil will befall you."

"And from whom, pray?" I inquired haughtily.

"My Lord Cardinal."

"Richelieu!" I gasped, and I know that I paled, although I strove not to do so.

He bent over until his lips were on a level with my ear. "Who killed Beausire?" he whispered suddenly.

I recoiled as if he had struck me. Then, in an access of fury, I sprang upon him, and seizing him by the costly lace about his throat, I shook him viciously in my grasp.

"What do you know?" I cried. "Answer me, sir, or I will strangle you. What do you know? Confess!?

With an effort he wrenched himself free, and flung me back against the wall.

"Enough to hang you," he snarled, panting for breath. "Keep your distance, you young dog, and listen to me, or it will be the worse for you."

Limp and mute, I remained where I was.

"You may not know me well, Bleville"—he spoke now in calm and deliberate accents—"but those who do will tell you that I am a dangerous man to thwart. Your presence in Paris is distasteful to me. I have determined that you shall quit it, and go you shall—either to Lorraine or the Bastille, as you choose."

"I choose neither, sir," I answered defiantly.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"There is no third course open for you, unless, indeed, it be Montfauçon and the hangman. Come, be reasonable; take this appointment and go to Lorraine to recruit your health. Remember, vicomte, the cardinal has not forgotten his nephew's death, and it will go hard with you if I but whisper your name in his ear."

"You cannot substantiate your calumny!" I exclaimed.

"Ho, ho! Calumny, eh?" he jeered.

"Yes, calumny," I repeated, thinking to have found a loophole.

But my hopes were soon dashed.

"Pish!" he said; "but I have proofs, boy; written proofs. I have a letter which Beausire wrote to his wife on the morning of his death, wherein he told her he was going to St. Germain to a rendezvous with de Bleville."

"And why," I inquired suspiciously, "if such be the case, why was this letter not shown to Monseigneur de Richelieu by the widow?"

"Because it contained a request that if he fell, no disclosure should be made. The widow was forced to respect his last wishes. But she died last week, as you may possibly be aware. She was my sister, as you may also know, and after her death I found this letter among other treasured papers.

"What do you say now? Will you accept the appointment?"

"It was an honorable duel," I murmured sullenly.

He laughed.

"You can explain that to His Eminence," he answered derisively, "if you think it will weigh with him."

I knew full well that it would not; for, besides the royal edicts which forbade dueling—and in virtue of which we had gone to St. Germain to fight without seconds, trusting to each other's honor, so that there might be no witnesses, and so that the survivor might not be pestered with the law—Beausire was the cardinal's nephew.

Again, Castelroc repeated that monotonous question, "Will you accept the appointment?"

For an instant I wavered, and had it not been for the memory of Mlle. de la Haudraye, who, at that very moment, would, I knew, be waiting for me in the Rue de Bac, I believe I should have ended by assenting. As it was, I could not leave Paris then. It was but the night before that I had tasted of the cup of life's happiness, when she had promised to become the Vicomtesse de Bleville, and I would make a desperate stand before the cup was dragged from my lips.

"Would you vouchsafe to tell me why you desire my absence?" I inquired at length.

"Because your presence annoys me," he answered surlily.

"That is no explanation, monsieur. I must have a reason."

And, by Heaven, you shall!" he retorted furiously. "Listen, sir. There is a certain lady in Paris whom I love and whom I desire to wed; but I may not do so while you are by."

The absurdity of his explanation was such that I could not withhold a laugh.

I do not understand how my presence can affect your *affaires du cœur*."

"No more do I! *Mort de ma vie*, I do not!" he answered vehemently. "But women are strange things, and this one has the bad taste to prefer you to me."

"And you think," I answered banteringly, not because I believed his preposterous tale, but because I desired to humour his mendacity, "that if I were absent; if this amorous maid's heart were no longer set aflame by the sight of my beauty, she might turn kindly to you?"

"You have said it," he cried bitterly. "For you are young and rich, and she would marry you for your money alone, whereas I am not so young, and far from wealthy."

I looked at the richness of his apparel, and of the room wherein we stood and smiled.

"But. M. de Castelroc," I exclaimed, "how can I be guilty of all this? I do not seek to wed the maid."

He looked at me in blank astonishment.

"You do not seek to wed Mlle. de la Haudraye?"

"Who?" I thundered, starting forward.

"Mlle. de la Haudraye."

For a moment I stared at him; then, stimulated by anger and scorn, I burst into a long, loud laugh.

"It amuses you?" he said icily.

"*Par Dieu*! In truth it does! Imagine the presumption of a man of your years and reputation, aspiring to the hand of such a woman as Mlle. de la Haudraye! Mon Dieu, 'tis passing droll!"

And with my hands on my sides I gave unrestrained vent to my hilarity, forgetful for the moment of the cardinal and the dungeon yawning at my feet.

But Castelroc sobered me suddenly by picking up that plaguey parchment.

When you have had your laugh, you young fool, perhaps you will reconsider the advisability of accepting this document," he snarled, white with passion.

"May the devil take you and your document," I answered, picking up my hat. "Do what you please. I remain in Paris."

"I will give you twenty-four hours to deliberate," he cried.

"My mind will be unaltered in twenty-four years."

"Then, *mon Dieu*, I will go at once."

He touched a bell that stood upon the table.

"My hat and cloak, Guitant," he said to the servant who answered his summons, "and order my carriage. I am going to the Palais Cardinal."

"And I to the Rue du Bac," I cried, as the door closed upon the lackey. "To the Rue du Bac, to tell Mlle. de la Haudraye what manner of man you are, and what you are about to do. Now, master mouchard!" I exclaimed triumphantly, "if you imagine that your suit will prosper after that; if you imagine that the Comte de la Haudraye will permit his daughter to wed one of the cardinal's spies, you are a greater fool than I hold you for."

It was a rash speech, but for the life of me I could not have withheld it.

"You shall not go!" he roared, turning livid. "You shall not leave here but to go to the Bastille." Then raising his voice: "Ho, there, someone! *À moi*!"

My sword was out in a trice, and I rushed wildly at him, for his threat had frightened me, and I saw that my rashness was like to cost me dear.

He drew as I sprang forward, and was barely in time to parry a stroke that threatened to end his intriguing for all time. Before I could disengage, my arms were seized from behind, and, struggling madly, I was held there at his mercy.

But he only laughed and, sheathing his sword, said the cardinal would deal with me.

I was flung rudely down, and while one servant pinned me to the ground, another fetched a rope wherewith they bound me firmly, hand and foot. Then Castelroc rolled me over and struck me on the face.

I opened my mouth to tell him in fitting terms what I thought of his act, when, quick as lightning, he gagged me with a *poire d'angoisse*; then, with a parting gibe, he strode away and, locking the door after him, left me there, stretched upon the ground, powerless, inert, and mute.

II

For perhaps ten minutes I lay where I had been thrown, too stunned by the rude manner in which I had been handled to indulge in active thought. I did not think—at least not coherently; I was content to lie, like the human log they had made me, with a dull sense of anger at my defeat and powerlessness, and with a dismal feeling of despair.

Presently, however, I revived somewhat. The ticking of the ormolu clock was irritating to me, and I felt a burning desire to dash it from its shelf and silence it. But as I gazed upon the ornament I turned my thoughts to the time it measured, and in spirit I followed the Marquis de Castelroc to the Palais Cardinal.

"Even now," I thought, "he will be there; say he is kept waiting five minutes, it will be half past eight before he has speech of the cardinal, another five minutes to relate his story, and ten minutes for his return, accompanied by an officer of Richelieu's guards or of the Mousquetaires.

"By a quarter to nine I shall be arrested; by nine o'clock I shall be in the Châtelet, and by to-morrow in the Bastille."

I shuddered and groaned alternately for the next minute—and groaning with a choke-pear in one's mouth is not easily accomplished.

Next I remembered that I had my own rash tongue to thank for the ropes about me. Had I held my peace I might have been left free to proceed to the Rue du Bac, and warn Adeline and her father of what was about to take place. I could have gone calmly to the Bastille, afterward,

reassured by the vows which I knew my lady would utter, and—I thought—fulfill, to wait for me. She might have to wait a few years, but even the Cardinal de Richelieu could not live forever; he was already old, and, in the end, I should be released, and we might still be happy.

But to disappear in this fashion, as if the earth had consumed me—it was dreadful! She would not know that it had been Castelroc's handiwork, and after she had mourned me for a few weeks, with that villain at hand to console her, who could say what might happen?

Women, I told myself, were fickle things, and many had an unhealthy fancy for a profligate, especially when, like Castelroc, he chanced to be courtly, handsome, and gifted with a persuasive tongue.

As these thoughts paraded themselves tormentingly before my brain, I was nigh upon becoming mad with anger. In a paroxysm of rage I writhed like a wounded snake upon the polished floor, and rolled myself over and over, until I had almost broken my pinioned arms.

I paused at length in my futile struggles, and lay panting, on my back, staring stupidly at the hands of the time-piece, which now pointed to half past eight. In another quarter of an hour Castelroc would return.

Oh, if I could only have that quarter of an hour free, so that I might yet go to the Rue du Bac!

Then the thought of escape presented itself, and I was astonished that it had not occurred to me before. The next instant, however, I laughed inwardly—the choke-pear prevented me from laughing aloud—as I remembered how impossible it was. But I set myself to think.

If only I could release my hands! But how? I looked about. My sword lay on the ground, but I could devise no means of employing it.

Then my eyes alighted on the tapers that had been left burning, and my heart almost ceased to beat at the idea they suggested.

I glance at the clock. It was already twenty-five minutes to nine. If only I had time. And at the thought I fell to cursing myself for not having acted sooner.

In ten minutes Castelroc would be back. Yes, but that was if he gained immediate audience. What if the cardinal kept him waiting? He might spend a half hour, an hour, or even two hours in the antechamber.

Richelieu was not particular, and he had tried the patience of better men than Castelroc in this fashion.

Still, fortune favors fools and rogues as well as brave men, so it would not do to build my hopes upon a moonbeam. Of ten minutes I was certain, and what a desperate man could do in ten minutes, I would do.

With the agility of a reptile I wriggled across the room, and having turned myself upon my face, I contrived to kneel. Next, with my chin upon the table, I strove to raise the weight of my body.

I had almost succeeded, when of a sudden my feet slipped, and I fell heavily to the ground, dragging the table with me. Two of the tapers spluttered and went out, but the third, fortunately, still burned upon the floor.

With a wildly thumping heart I lay there listening, wondering if the noise of my fall had attracted attention. But as all remained quiet, I crawled over to the lighted taper, and having gained my knees, I bent over it backward, holding the rope that bound my wrists in the flame, heedless of the searing of my flesh.

In half a minute my hands were free, although severely cut and scorched. To draw the gag from my mouth, and cut the cords at my ankles with my dagger, was the work of an instant.

Then, having righted the candle and recovered my sword, I made stealthily across the room to the window. It was minutes more.

III

I opened the window and looked out. It was a fine night, and clear enough, although the moon had not yet risen, for which I was thankful.

Pausing for a moment to inhale a deep, invigorating breath of the pure April air, I glanced about me for a means of escape, but groaned as I beheld the street pavement a good forty feet beneath, and nothing that might assist me to climb down, as I had hoped.

I wasted a full minute in cursing my ill-fortune, as I realized that, after all, there was nothing for it but to submit to the inevitable, and remain.

Only three minutes left! The thought acted on me like a dagger prod, and served to quicken my tumultuous thoughts. I turned wildly this way and that, and at last my eyes fastened upon the sloping roof of the adjoining house, not more than twelve feet below the window whereat I stood, but quite three feet away to the left.

For the moment I thought of jumping it; but the peril was too great. I would of a certainty have been dashed to pieces. Then a bright thought occurred to me, and I rushed back for my cloak, which lay in the room.

An iron stanchion protruded from the wall, a little to the left, and some two feet below the window. I know not what it did there, nor for the moment did I care. It was already a quarter to nine.

Reaching out, I tied with trembling hands a corner of my cloak to that most apropos of stanchions. Even as I completed the task, a carriage came rumbling down the street; I felt myself grow cold with apprehension. Could this be Castelroc?

I went near to dropping from my perch on the window sill at the thought. But the coach passed on, and I took its advent as a good omen. I would cheat the dog yet! Verily, I laughed as I lowered myself gently from the window.

For a moment I clung to the sill, suspended in mid-air; then, moving my right leg across, I got astride of the stanchion, wondering for the first time if it would bear my weight, and sweating with fear at the thought.

But the iron was stout and firmly planted. Presently I was sliding slowly down my cloak, until there was perhaps a yard of it above my head. Next, taking a firm hold, I set myself to swing backward and forward, until at length the roof of the adjoining house was immediately below my feet.

Twice might I have loosened my hold and dropped with safety, but a miserable fright made me hesitate each time until it was too late. The third time, however, realizing that the strain was beginning to tell upon

my arms, and that I might not have strength enough left to swing across again, I commended my soul to God, and let go.

Down I came with a crash upon the tiles, and it is a miracle that I did not slide over the edge of the sloping roof, plunging into eternity. I did, indeed, slip for a foot or so, but in wild terror I clawed the roof like a cat, and caught myself betimes.

Panting, and covered with perspiration, I lay there for a minute or two to regain my breath and steady my shaken nerves, gazing at my still dangling cloak and at the lighted window above, and marveling greatly that I had had the daring to undertake so desperate a journey.

Castelroc had not yet returned, so I concluded that the cardinal had kept him waiting, Still, he might appear at any moment, and I was too near my prison to feel safe as yet.

So picking myself carefully up, I crawled along on hands and knees for a while, until presently, growing bolder with experience, I rose to my feet and hurried as rapidly as I dared along that elevated highway.

For some five minutes I pushed steadily onward, with naught save a stray cat or two to keep me company.

Albeit the road was passing new to me, and vastly interesting, I began to weary of it, and paused to think how I might descend to the more usual walks of men.

I had reached the corner of the Rue Trecart by then, and looking about me, I saw an attic window conveniently situated on one of the roofs to my left.

Turning, I wended my steps in that direction, and with infinite pains I crawled down until I stood beside it.

The window was fastened; but it was an easy matter to put my foot through it, and afterward my arm, and thus gain admittance.

I stood for a moment in a small, unfurnished room, to listen if there might be any one at hand to resent my intrusion. Hearing naught, I went forward, opened the door, passed out on to the landing, and in the dark I felt my way stealthily down the stairs.

I had reached the first floor and was debating whether I should go boldly down and quit the house in a rational manner by the street door, when suddenly, hearing male voices and a certain raucous laughter,

suggestive of the bottle, I deemed it best to risk no meetings that might be avoided.

I applied my ear to the keyhole of the door by which I stood. As all remained still, I turned the handle and entered. There was nobody in the room, which I could just discern was tastily furnished, and contained a bed; so, closing the door after me, I stole across to the window, which opened on to a wooden balcony.

As I reached it my attention was arrested by the clash of steel below.

"What," I thought, "brawling at this hour, and in the very streets of Paris, in spite of the edicts?"

Softly I opened the window and stepped out on to the balcony. The sight which met my eyes filled me with astonishment and anger.

A tall, well-built cavalier, with his back against the wall immediately beneath me, the crown of his hat almost on a level with the balcony, which was not more than six feet from the ground, stood defending himself with masterly dexterity against the onslaught of three evil-looking knaves.

If these men had no respect for the laws of the king, they might at least have some for the laws of chivalry. I did not hesitate a moment what to do, and forgot my own affairs utterly. Drawing my sword, I vaulted over the low wooden railings and, like the warrior St. Michael from heaven to do battle for the right, I dropped, with a yell, into their astonished midst.

IV

Notre Dame! How those three ruffians stared at my unexpected and inexplicable advent!

And I, having seen what manner of men they were, felt no compunction at profiting by their surprise to run my sword through the nearest of them, from breast to back. He uttered a sharp cry, dropped his

rapier, clawed the air for a moment; then, falling in a heap upon the ground, lay still.

With a shout of rage another one sprang at me before I could release my sword. The lunge he directed upon me would assuredly have sent me from the world unshriven, had not the cavalier interposed his blade and turned the murderous stroke aside.

The next moment, however, he had to defend his own skin from the third ruffian, who sought to take the same advantage of him that his fellow had endeavored to take of me.

But the respite had permitted me to regain my sword, and I now engaged my assailant across the body of his fallen comrade, and kept him busy, albeit the light was bad.

As I had expected, he was but a sorry swordsman, and his parries reminded one of a windmill. Nevertheless, he kept up a vigorous cut-and-thrust play of the old Italian school, which, although soon reckoned with in daylight, is mighty discomposing in the dark, and on a slippery ground with a body at your feet to stumble over if you lunge too far.

During the first few passes I laughed at his labors, and asked him banteringly if he were wielding a battle-ax; but presently, when I had been forced to turn my sword into a buckler three or four times, I recognized that the season was ill-timed for jesting.

If only I could catch that busy arm of his quiet for a second, I knew I should have him.

Presently he essayed a direct thrust, thinking to force my guard, but I caught his point, and with a sharp riposte, which ended in an engage in tierce, I brought his play to a standstill at last.

The opportunity was not to be wasted; so, with a quick one, two stroke, I sent my point round under his elbow, and while he went fumbling away to the right for my blade, it was grating against his ribs on the left. The man uttered no sound.

He fell heavily across his companion’s body. Then, raising himself by a stupendous effort, he fastened one arm around my leg, and attempted to shorten his sword. The exertion soon overcame him, however, and as I kicked my leg free, he sank down in a swoon.

The whole affair had not lasted two minutes. The chevalier was still at work with his opponent; but when, turning, I advanced to his aid, the remaining ruffian sprang back, and setting off at a mad gallop down the street, was soon lost to our eyes and ears alike.

"I am deeply indebted to you, monsieur," said the chevalier in a curiously muffled voice, as he held out his left hand to me. "My right hand is bleeding slightly," he explained.

I took the proffered hand and, in answering him, I looked up at his face and saw he wore a mask.

"I am happy to have been of service to so valiant a gentleman," I said, bowing. "But how came you, if I may inquire, into such company?"

"I was decoyed hither," he answered with a bitter laugh. "I was bidden come alone, and I was foolish enough to accept the invitation."

Whereat, thinking that possibly there was some jealous lady in the matter, and knowing how such affairs are managed, I inquired no further.

"Had it not been for your timely arrival," my companion added, "there would have been an end of me by now. But whither are you bent?" he inquired suddenly.

"To the Rue du Bac," I answered, as my own forgotten affairs came back to my mind.

"Then I will take you there in my carriage; it is waiting not many yards from here. I can thus make up to you for the time that you have lost on my behalf. But let us see these knaves first."

We turned the two fellows over. One of them was but slightly wounded; but the other one—the first to fall—was quite dead. We dragged them under the balcony, and propped them against the wall.

"I will send someone to attend to them," said my companion. "Come, it is not safe to linger. The patrol may pass at any moment."

With that he linked his arm in mine, and drew me away from the spot. And as we went he fell to thanking me again, and ended by praising my swordsmanship—albeit he had seen but little of it himself—and saying that it was an accomplishment one should be thankful for.

“And yet, monsieur,” I exclaimed, “although I am thankful enough to-night, since it has afforded me the opportunity of serving you, yet I am at this very moment in grievous trouble, thanks to my rapier play.”

“Ah!” he murmured, with a show of interest. “And if I am not impertinent, what is this trouble? I may be able to assist you—who knows?”

I required no second invitation, for youth is ever ready with its confidences, and, as we walked along, I began my narrative. When I spoke of Castelroc as a spy of Richelieu’s, he stopped abruptly.

“The Marquis de Castelroc is no spy of the cardinal’s,” he said coldly.

“Ah, pardon! I have offended you, monsieur!” I exclaimed. “Castelroc is a friend of yours.”

“God forbid!” he ejaculated.

“But you know him?”

“Yes, for the greatest rogue unhanged. But pursue your tale. You interest me.”

V

Briefly I told my story down to the point where I had sprung from the balcony to his assistance.

“The dastard!” he uttered, then quickly added, “Hélas, my poor friend, your case is indeed grave; but if you were to seek audience of the cardinal and explain to him—qui sait?—he might forgive. The affair is old and probably forgotten. Moreover, you appear to have been forced into this duel with Beausire, and, ma foi, I fail to see how a gentleman could have done otherwise than fight under such circumstances.”

“Aye, monsieur,” I answered, shaking my head; “but the cardinal will not trouble to inquire. His edicts forbid dueling. That is sufficient. But of more were needed—Beausire was his nephew.”

“You misjudge him.”

“Nay, monsieur, I do not, I recognize in His Eminence a great and just man, too just to err on the side of mercy.”

At that juncture we turned the corner and walked full into a patrol coming in the opposite direction.

My companion surprised me by bidding the sergeant go attend to the wounded man we had left behind.

“Has there been a duel?” the fellow inquired.

“Possibly,” answered the cavalier with great composure.

The sergeant eyed us suspiciously for a moment, then bade us return with him.

“We have business elsewhere, and the affair does not concern us,” answered my companion.

“I know not that—” the other began, when suddenly:

“Peace, fool,” the cavalier muttered, and drawing forth his right hand, which he had said was wounded, and hitherto kept carefully under his cloak, he held it up.

I knew not what magic was in those fingers, but at the sight of them the sergeant fell back with a cry of dismay; then, recovering himself, he bowed low before us, and bade us pass.

A moment later, and before I could master my surprise at what I had witnessed, we entered a carriage that stood waiting hard by.

“Palais Cardinal!” said my companion.

“No, no!” I exclaimed, making for the door; but the coach was already in motion. I turned to expostulate with my companion. He had removed his mask, and a wild panic seized me as, by the light of a street lamp, I recognized—the cardinal!

“Well, my young friend,” he laughed, “you are in luck to-night; and since you have caught Richelieu breaking his own edicts, you have a right to expect that he will not judge you over harshly, and that for once, this ‘great and just man’ will err on the side of mercy.”

“Your Eminence!” I cried.

He raised his hand, upon which I now beheld the sacred amethyst which had so subjugated the sergeant.

“Say no more,” he said; “You owe me nothing, while I owe you my life. As for this Castelroc, I am sorry to keep you from Mlle. de la

Haudraye for a few moments longer; but I shall be grateful if you will afford me the amusement of beholding his face when we walk in, arm in arm, to grant him the audience for which he is, no doubt, still waiting. I know the gentleman of old; he was involved in a Gascon plot last winter, and had a finger in one of Anne of Austria's tasty pies a few weeks ago. I have lately been thinking of finding him a change of lodging, and your story has decided me. I do not think a sojourn in the Bastille would be amiss, do you?"

I confessed with a laugh that I did not, and a few minutes later Richelieu's fancy for studying facial expressions found ample entertainment in the countenance of the marquis.

As ten was striking—so quickly did it all occur—Castelroc and I left the Palais Cardinal in separate carriages, he going to the Bastille with a mounted escort, and I—at last—to the Rue du Bac.

The Dupes

The Ludgate, January 1900

Chapter I

I was kept waiting for nigh upon an hour at my illustrious client's hôtel, in a room of surpassing elegance, sadly out of tune with the rags I wore.

Had the insolent lacquey who escorted me suited his own taste and judgment, I should have been less pleasantly lodged until the Seigneur de Launay arrived; but I had a word or two to say as to where I would wait, and when the fellow remonstrated, a threat to thrash him on the spot and have him dismissed anon, silenced him effectively.

As my ill-shod feet trod the soft carpet, and as I gazed about me at the different articles of value wherewith the room was furnished, I was sorely puzzled to understand how my cousin—whose means I knew to be far from ample—came to be so admirably lodged. To sustain such wealthy surroundings as those I contemplated, must soon bring him into a state of destitution akin to my own.

But still greater was my wonderment at the intimacy wherein, to judge by his position in the cavalcade which I had stood to see go by in the Rue St. Honoré, he was held by Louis XIII.

Was the Cardinal asleep that he detected not this wolf in sheep's clothing? Or had the Seigneur de Launay abandoned the interests of that arch-plotter, the Duke of Orléans, and attached himself in soul as well as in body to the King?

I could not tell—for 'twas two years since my disgrace and banishment from Court—two years since I started on that downward

route at a headlong pace which had brought me into the tatters that hung about me. I knew not what had taken place at Court during the period, but I did know that when I turned my back upon the Louvre, Ferdinanad de Launay was already deep in the mire of half a score of Orléaniste plots, which, I had thought, would have earned him a dungeon in the Bastille long before the day whereof I write.

My speculations were ended at last by his arrival. It was announced to me by a clatter of hoofs in the courtyard below, followed by a bustle which would have honoured a prince of the blood.

There was a quick step in the ante-room beyond, then the door opened, and my cousin, handsome, flushed and breathless, stood before me.

I had expected that, seeing me in my sorry plight, chivalry would have bidden him forget our feuds, and that his greeting, if not cousinly, would at least be friendly—especially when considered that ‘twas he, not I, who sought this interview.

Not so, however. The right hand, which still clasped his hat and riding whip, remained at his side, the other rested on the pummel of his sword, and his eyes travelled over me, from my unkempt head to my well-worn boots, with a disdainful curiosity which made my gorge rise.

“So Verville,” he said at length, in a scornful tone, “‘tis to this that your profligate’s career has brought you!”

“Even as your treachery has earned you that suit of velvet,” I retorted, towering grimly above him in my rage.

Notre Dame! How my words smote home! How I chuckled inwardly to see the flush die from the boy’s face, and his teeth catch at his nether lip.

“What do you mean?” he enquired.

“Pah,” I answered; “you understand me well enough.”

He gazed at me intently for a moment, as if searching in my bold eyes to read how much I really knew. Then, flinging down his hat and whip, he advanced toward me with outstretched hand, and a false, courtier’s smile upon his lips.

“Forgive me, Eugène,” he said, “if I was brusque, but the sight of your garments pained me deeply, and—”

"A truce to all this, master courtier," I broke in surlily, and putting my hands behind me, "my temper is passing short and has been greatly tried this morning. Will you explain, I pray you, why I have been forced hither without being asked if I chose to come?"

He fell back a pace, and his face assumed a look of sorrow.

"Believe me, Eugène," he exclaimed, "I would have sought you out, but that I believed you dead."

"And had not some evil angel bidden me to gape at you," I retorted sharply, "your thoughts would have been correct ere this, for to-day I am houseless and foodless, and I was on my way to the Seine to put a fitting end to a mis-spent life, when I stopped to see the Royal cavalcade go by. Sangdieu! but you cut a bold figure at the King's side," I continued, with a wild laugh that startled him. "You reminded me of Cinq-Mars—'twas thus I saw him ride by the King; 'twas thus I saw him smile at the monarch's vapid jests; may you have the courage to mount the scaffold, when your turn comes, with as firm a tread!"

He went white to the very lips.

"For God's sake, Eugéne, be silent!" he said, scarce above a whisper. "I mean you well."

"Then you have altered greatly since last we parted," I rejoined coldly.

But, say what I would, I could not anger him as I thought to—for I was bent upon ascertaining the reason of his increasing friendliness, and I knew that in anger a man's tongue will oft betray him.

He persisted in his protestations that he meant me well, and he did but desire to help me retrieve my fortunes.

It sounded marvellous from the lips of scheming, selfish de Launay; but, in the end, when, among other things, he told me that he was about to marry, I, remembering how often the influence of a good woman will make a rogue honourable, and a traitor true, recognised the change that had been wrought in my cousin's character, and believed in his sincerity.

And so my fortunes altered, and I had that day the satisfaction of beholding the eyes of the lacquey who had that morning so haughtily

addressed me, grow round and large at the sight of the suit of grey velvet that encased my stalwart figure.

For nearly a month I stayed on at the Hôtel de Launay, and what with sumptuous dinners and generous wines, I became each day more grateful to my cousin for having rescued me from the brink of suicide, to bring me back to a world of warmth and ease, such as I had not known for many a day. The mistrust which penury breeds in all of us was excluded from my heart by good living.

But, albeit in a measure, my old gay recklessness was upon me, yet at times I would chafe at the manner of my life, until in the end I broached the subject to Ferdinand. In his reply methought I found a motive for his kindness, and again I grew mistrustful.

He urged me to espouse the Orléans' cause, gather what friends had returned to me in my new prosperity, and when the time was ripe, to either join the Duke in Lorraine, or strike for him in Paris, as should seem best; I heard him through; then, with a sad, bitter laugh—

"So, Ferdinand," I said, "it is for this that you saved me from the Seine? Hélas! I had ascribed a better motive to your generosity."

"Nor were you wrong in doing so," he cried hotly. "It is naught to me whether you serve the Duke or not; you are still my cousin, and my most trusted friend. But, when you ask me for employment, would you have me counsel you to take service in a cause to which I am at heart averse?"

I was forced to grant that he was right.

"When first I saw you in the Rue St. Honoré," he continued, "I will frankly admit, Eugéne, that your condition struck me as that of a desperate man, ripe for any enterprise that might put a coat on your back and a meal in your stomach, and it was chiefly in the hope of obtaining another recruit for Gaston d'Orléans that I sent my servant after you. But, before I saw you here, nobler thoughts had overcome my purpose, and again I say to-day, that it matters little to me whether you serve the Duke or not.

Before so frank an admission my mistrust melted like snow before the sun, and for some days no more was said. When at length we did

revert to the subject, it was I who led the conversation, and I listened earnestly to my cousin's arguments.

I knew much of the state of France, but chiefly as seen through the eyes of Richelieu's enemies; for, during the past two years, gamesters and bullies had been my chief associates, and such men as these cordially hated the Cardinal, who made war upon them and their brawling customs. Coupled with this was a (hitherto passive) hatred for the King, who had disgraced me; so that it is not unnatural that I turned a willing ear to my cousin's doctrines—and so persuasive was his tongue that in the end I became as bold an Orléaniste as you might find in France, awaiting impatiently the time to unsheathe my ever-ready sword.

Chapter II

And so the weeks wore on apace, and the trees grew green again, in their April garb, until one day my cousin startled me by suggesting that I should accompany him to Court. I reminded him of the manner of my dismissal; but he laughed at my scruples, saying the King's memory was short, and that, as his cousin, I might rely upon a gracious welcome.

His arguments prevailed, and I went. But I had not been wrong in my surmise that Louis XIII would remember, and still hold me in ill-odour; for, at the very mention of my name, his brow was wrinkled by an angry frown, whilst Richelieu watched surreptitiously through half-closed lids.

But de Launay bent forward, and said something in the Royal ear which drove the frown from Louis' face, and, with a gracious smile, he held out his hand for me to kiss.

And as I turned me, after that ceremony was over, I found his smile reflected upon the faces of his courtiers, one and all, and everywhere was I received with friendly words and an attention almost servile—so high in favour stood my cousin then.

This was truly the beginning of a new era in my life, for amongst that throng of courtly stars there was one that to me shone more brightly than all the rest, and drew me towards it to become its satellite.

'Tis passing strange, and to me inexplicable, that I—who thought to have done with all the follies of adolescence—should at the age of thirty have found in a heart grown so callous and hard with the reckless life I had lived, a spot still vulnerable to a woman's smiles. But more inexplicable still was it to me to find my love returned—to see the blush mount to my lady's cheeks and pleasure brighten her eyes at my approach.

And so it fell out that I was less often to be found at the Hôtel de Launay than at the side of Mademoiselle de Troiscantins.

I was no longer a ruined gamester; no longer a man of blighted hopes and gloomy moods; but a courtier once more—a gallant! a fool! My life became one round of fêtes. Not that these vapid merrymakings pleased or amused me, but they kept me near to her I loved.

My bygone recklessness arose before me like a reproachful sprite, and as I gazed upon the lovely Madeline, so pure and saintly, a blush of shame would warm my sallow skin, evoked by the realisation of how vile and utterly unworthy I was of the tenderness she lavished on me.

My cousin would quip me at times, and mock the decorum which now marked my once ribald tongue, and I would sullenly resent his jests, and pursue my endeavour to cleanse my over-maculate honour.

Then again, as I remembered that, in spite of all, I was but a penniless adventurer, whose very finery belonged to another's wardrobe, I would determine to quit Paris and take my unfortunate presence to some other clime. But when I went to say farewell, my courage failed me—my adieux were unspoken and I lingered on.

Next I determined to have done with plotting; but here a rude shock awaited me, for, when I broached the matter to de Launey,

"I'll be sworn," he said, "that your leathery conscience, which has at last been awakened to a sense of duty by Mademoiselle de Troiscantins, has something to do with this."

"Peste!" I replied impatiently; "can you not leave Mademoiselle out of the discussion?"

"Nay," he rejoined with a laugh, "methinks I do well to mention her, for let me tell you, Master Saint, that there is no more fervent Orléaniste in all France than this chit of a girl."

"Impossible!" I cried angrily; "she is no plotter! Look at her face, man. Why, 'tis a mirror of purity and innocence!"

He laughed a cynical laugh that angered me, as, with a toss of his fine head, he answered,

"Who speaks of plotters? I will allow that this angel of yours is—so far as a man may judge—an incarnation of virtue and sanctity; but be her soul in whatever state it may, her heart, her sympathies are in the Orléaniste cause."

I was in no mood to allow his rascally tongue to paint for me my lady's character, so, taking up my hat, I went to seek the lady herself, and from her own lips, I learned that what de Launay had said was true.

Cordieu! How differently I viewed the Orléanistes from that day. We were no longer plotters and traitors, but apostles and martyrs of a holy cause in the defence of which I was prepared to sacrifice everything down to the last drop of blood in my veins—so mighty a sophist is love!

There was but one touch wanting to turn my treason into fanaticism, and that touch came from the King's own hand.

It was at a levée one morning. He paused before me in the ante-chamber and ran me over with an almost mocking glance.

"Ha! Chevalier," he murmured, "what a courtier you have become; you are never absent from our side."

I knew not how to read his words, nor what might underlie them, but the tone in which they were delivered boded ill.

"Your Majesty is gracious enough to permit me the honour of being near you," I answered, bowing.

"Yes, yes," he said, so loud that all might hear him. "It gives us pleasure to see your cousin's clothes—he is a man of taste."

A titter went through the crowd, and for a moment I stood dumbfounded, unable to believe that a King's lips could shape the vulgar taunt, whereby I recognised that I was again dismissed from Court.

I stood before that Royal fool, white with passion, and the glance I bent upon him was so terrible that he quailed before it, and maybe,

repented him of what he had said. Then of a sudden, I broke into a loud discordant laugh which frightened those about me, and the old foolhardiness which had made me scoff at destiny was again upon me.

A stinging retort was on my lips; but remembering that it might cost me my life, or at least my liberty, and that whilst I lived I might be avenged, I checked my tongue betimes, and, turning on my heel, without another word, stalked boldly and firmly from the Royal presence.

And as I hastened home, to tell de Launay of the insult which had been offered me, there arose in my mind the memory of certain words that Mademoiselle de Troiscantins had spoken days before:

"If by some act of God this worthless King were set aside, and the impending civil war averted, how much misery would France be spared!"

Yes, Mordieu! I was resolved! My hand would be the act of God, and with one bold stroke I would gain the day for Gaston d'Orléans without the butchery of battle. One man should die; Louis the fool—'twas thus I dubbed him in my anger—and his death should spare many a woman tears of widowhood.

My cousin appeared frightened by my fury and by the resolve which I communicated to him, and sought at first to dissuade me. But when, growing calmer, I reasoned with him, and showed him what a victory it would gain for the Duke of Orléans, he wavered, and at last bid me take counsel with Mademoiselle de Troiscantins and be guided by her judgment.

I agreed to this, and entering de Launay's carriage, I drove to the Rue de l'Epée.

I found Madeline in a state of great excitement, for news had been just brought her of what had taken place at the Louvre; and upon seeing me, she vented in unmeasured terms her indignation at the gross insult which I had received.

"The King will repent, never fear," I cried, "but not until—"

"Until what?"

"Until it is too late—until his hour is at hand!"

She recoiled from me, and her cheeks went deadly pale. "Do you mean to kill him?" she gasped.

Calmly I told her what was in my mind, adding that I had come to her, so that she—who had become the guiding star of my life—might give me counsel in this extremity. Nor did I forget to point out what a solution it would afford to the Orléans difficulties.

After she had overcome the natural horror wherewith at first my purpose had inspired her, she pondered deeply for some moments; then, raising her wonderful eyes to mine—

"Can you do it without peril to yourself?" she asked.

"I think so," I replied. "Moreover, there will be small risk, for when the King is dead, Orléans will be master; and I do not think he will forget me."

"Then go," she said, placing her arms about my neck, and speaking in a tender, almost tearful voice. "Go, Eugène, and strike this great blow for a good and sacred cause; and when it is done, come back to me—I will shield you, my love, and, if you ask me, I will marry you, so that none thereafter shall reproach you with your poverty, for I am rich."

My senses swam; I seemed drunk with happiness, and for a moment all in the world but this lovely woman was forgotten. Then, as the memory of grim realities awakened in my mind, I tore myself from those clinging arms and went to lay my plans.

There was to be a fête at the Palais Bourdois upon the following night. Then would I reckon with Louis the Just.

Chapter III

Craftily and cunningly did I prepare, so that no suspicion might attach to me—for the fate of Ravaillac, the last regicide, was still in my mind, and I had no stomach for the brodéquin and the scalding oil. Moreover, there was happiness stored up for my future, and remembering that if I had tasted so little of it in the past, it is but natural that I clung to a life which had suddenly become of value to me.

The King, I had ascertained, would return alone to the Louvre. It was my purpose to follow him, disguised as an attendant, conceal myself in his bedchamber, and strike as soon as he was alone.

Albeit I had received an invitation, I dared not be present at the fête; but having assumed my disguise—retaining, however, my sword, lest I should have need of it—I entered the grounds of the Palais Bourdois as eleven was striking.

I wandered aimlessly about the garden, watching the lighted windows, my mind dwelling more upon Madeline and the days to come than upon the task before me, when, suddenly, a murmur of voices close at hand arrested my attention. I stopped and, crouching behind a tree, I peered about me.

For some moments all remained still, and I was beginning to think that my over-wrought fancy had tricked me, when my vigilant eye caught the shimmer of something—probably, I told myself, some garment.

Stepping gently forth, I moved on tip-toe and under cover of the trees, drawn, nolens volens, towards that inhabited spot. Once the gravel crunched, and once a twig snapped ‘neath my tread, and each time I paused, with beating heart and listening ears; but all was still safe for that faint sound of voices. Then ‘twas a laugh, a woman’s smothered laugh, that startled me; but when at last from my position I was enabled to distinguish two human faces, faintly discernible in the light which fell upon them from the palace windows, it seemed to me that my heart had stopped beating, and that I was nigh upon death from the shock of what I beheld.

On a stone bench sat Ferdinand de Launay and Mademoiselle de Troiscantins!

His arm was about her neck, and her head—that lovely head I knew so well—rested upon his shoulder. The light was uncertain, and as I stood there, not ten paces from the traitors, with clenched teeth and the breath rushing stertorously through my nostrils, I prayed to God that either my eyes were being cheated, or else that I might awaken from the ghastly nightmare that was upon me.

Then, of a sudden, my own name came wafted towards me on the gentle breeze, followed by a sigh, a laugh, and a mocking epithet, and I knew at length that I was the victim of neither dream nor hallucination, but of treachery—dastardly, unseemly treachery; and in my anger I drew nearer to the trees that shaded them, until I could hear their whispered words.

Oh God! Why did I live to learn what their conversation told me? Why had not some merciful assassin ended my life an hour before, whilst I was happy in the belief that I was loved?

I cannot, even now that years are past, go over that conversation of theirs in detail—it was too horrible, too revolting. Enough when I tell you that I gathered from it that my cousin, whose extravagance had well-nigh ruined him, had betrayed my father and my elder brother, for association in a Gascon plot. My father had already mounted the scaffold at Toulouse, and my brother was to follow soon. It but remained to remove me, and for this my cousin had befriended me, and with his diabolical cunning had inveigled me in the Orléaniste cause.

I understood how all those hints thrown out by Madeline, of a bold hand that should end the battle at once by felling one of the leaders, were but meant to fire my enamoured senses.

It was de Launay himself—I gathered it from what he said—who had whispered in the Royal ear the insult which I had received from the King, whereby he meant to bring matters to the crisis to which they had come. I was to slay Louis XIII; he would denounce and destroy me, seat Orléans upon the throne of France, and, himself, inherit the Verville estates and the title which were mine, although I knew it not.

Mille diables! But they had schemed well, these two! And had it not been for their imprudent conversation, they would of a certainty have succeeded.

Oh, the bitterness of that disillusion! I was a fool! A shameless woman's dupe!

"To-morrow, Madeline," I heard him say as they arose to return to the palace, "to-morrow, when this second Ravaillac shall have done his work and been rewarded, I shall be a rich and powerful man. You will share my power and my wealth, sweetheart, and we will—"

I heard no more. It was with difficulty that I saved myself from swooning as I stood there, clinging for support to a friendly bough, peering after their retreating figures and invoking my heart's unspoken curses on their heads.

Chapter IV

I met the Seigneur de Launay half-an-hour later, as he emerged from the Palais Bourdois. He started at seeing me.

"Is anything wrong?" he whispered feverishly.

"Nothing of moment. But unless swift measures be taken, something will be."

I spoke calmly and even mildly, my fury mastered for the while.

"Dismiss your carriage," I said, "and come with me. We must pay a visit."

"Is it necessary that I should accompany you?" he asked; and I new full well what was in his craven mind.

"I can trust to no other companion; go alone I may not; yet, if I do not go, the King will still be alive to-morrow, and our chance will be lost."

"What is it," he enquired.

"Treason!" I answered fiercely; "black, dastardly treason. But never fear, I shall be in time to choke it before any harm is done. Come!"

In silence he walked along beside me for some ten minutes, during which he appeared lost in his musings. So lost, that he marked not the way I led him; until, as we entered the Rue de l'Epée, he suddenly lifted up his head.

"Ho there! Eugène, whither are we bound?" he cried, recognising the street.

"But a few steps further," I answered abruptly, and paced on until we stood before a door, upon which the number "24" was just discernible in the light of a lamp hard by.

"We are arrived," I said, stopping and turning to face him.

"But this, if I mistake not, is the house of Mademoiselle de Troiscantins."

"Precisely," I answered with a laugh, "and it is here that the treason, the damnable treason whereof I spoke, was hatched. The die is cast, most noble cousin; you and that woman have made an Orléaniste of me; I may not go back, for you have duped me too far, therefore I go on.

To-night, I set out to join the Duke of Orléans in Lorraine, but before I go, there will be a reckoning."

I faced him now, and my breath was hot and my eyes ablaze with the fury that possessed me. His jaw fell, and his handsome face grew ashen, as he caught the meaning of my words.

"I do not understand," he stammered.

"You will understand everything in a few minutes," I answered derisively, "for we are taught that in death all is made clear. You will understand how you duped me, and how I, in my turn, have duped you to accompany me hither so that justice may be done."

I laughed, and at the sound he recoiled as if I had struck him.

"You are mistaken," he gasped, trembling in every limb.

I flung down my hat and cloak, and unsheathed my sword as I advanced upon him.

"Draw! Traitor! Hound! Judas! Draw!" I thundered, flashing my blade before his eyes.

"You are mistaken," he repeated feebly, shrinking from me.

"What!" I jeered, "Can one so bold to plot be so slow to draw? Is there no manhood in you, that you stand there trembling like one smitten with the ague? Or has the sight of steel struck terror into your woman's heart?"

He threw back his head at the taunt; then, with a muttered oath, he drew and fell on guard.

Mortdieu! how I toyed with him! The hour was late, and none came that way to interrupt us. For full ten minutes I humoured his blundering swordplay, and mocked him the while with a recitation of his sins, asking him how it felt to die unshriven. He saw his death in my eyes, heard it in my voice, felt it in my wrists. The sweat burst into great

beads upon his forehead, and in that ten minutes he suffered twenty agonies.

A fearful shriek burst from his lips; he writhed for a second on my point like a wounded worm; then fell forward, and was dead before I had turned him over.

Seizing him, I dragged him from the middle of the road where we had fought, to the door of Mademoiselle's house. With his own dagger I pinned a slip of paper to his breast, whereon I had written: "An offering of her dupe, 'the second Ravaillac,' to Mademoiselle de Troiscantins."

Her coach was coming down the street as I completed my revengeful task; so, sheathing my sword and straightening my cloak, I moved swiftly away, leaving that carrion across her doorstep to greet her with its ghastly message.

The Malediction

Royal Magazine, June 1900

I stood erect and defiant, the point of my sword—to which the rash fool's blood still clung—resting upon my boot, and with cold contempt in my glance, I let my eyes wander over the score of idle dogs that encircled me—dogs that barked, yet dared not bite.

Two of them had raised my vanquished and unconscious opponent from the ground, and were endeavouring to staunch the blood which spurted freely from the wound I had given him. The others stood around us in a circle, growling and snarling like the curs they were, but taking care to keep beyond my reach.

"It is a nasty wound, Mein Herr," said one of those who tended the fallen man.

"The quarrel was of his own seeking," I exclaimed, angrily, "and he received his wound in fair fight. If there be one here who says that it is not so, to him I'll answer that he lies, and prove it upon his body if he dare to come forth and play the man."

Their snarling was arrested by the fierceness of my tone and gesture, and albeit their looks were black and sullen enough, their tongues were silent.

I vented my contempt in a harsh laugh of derision.

"So, my masters," I said, sheathing my sword and moving towards a point where the rabble was thinnest, "since none disputes my word, I pray you let me hence."

A way was opened at my approach. Not for me—as I had thought at first—but for another.

A tall, spare man, in the habit of a Capuchin monk, and with the cowl drawn over his head, elbowed his way through to where I stood.

His deep-set eyes met mine, and for a moment he held my gaze with a look of mingled sorrow and anger.

"So! You have been at your foul work again, Master von Huldenstein," he said in even, solemn tones that brought the blood to my face.

"You presume upon the safety of your sack-cloth," I answered hotly.

"And you, you presume upon the death of the Duke of Retzbach," he retorted with a show of righteous indignation. "When the Duke lived the edict was enforced, and men of your kidney were appalled from the ways of murder by the grim shadow of the Schwarzenbaum gibbet. But take heed, sir," he continued, raising his voice, "you shall not pursue your accursed trade with impunity. I will appeal to the King if need be, and you shall learn that there is still justice and retribution in Schwerlingen."

White with passion I stepped up to him, but he brushed me aside with a gesture almost of scorn, and my tongue—usually so nimble—clove to my teeth.

He bent over the unconscious man, whilst I looked on quivering with rage, and vainly racking my brain for a fitting answer.

Presently he turned to me again with flashing eyes.

"This man may die, sir," he cried. "Do you hear me? He may die!"

"Then do your shaveling's trade, and shrive him," I answered with callous cynicism.

Wonder and indignation seemed to choke his utterance for a moment. Then—

"Oh, God will punish you, you son of Cain," he exclaimed. "Your own murderous sword shall work your undoing, and if ever in your wasted life there should open out a way for better things"—he raised his right hand aloft, and his gaunt frame seemed to dilate and grow before my fascinated eyes—"may your accursed sword prove an insuperable barrier. In such an hour, if ever it should come to you, may God's curse strike you, and may His vengeance lay you low!"

A shudder ran through the crowd, as much at the words as at the frightful tone in which they were delivered, and many crossed themselves as if that monk had been the Devil.

"Silence, priest," I muttered, stepping close up to him, with my eyes on his. "Do not drive me to do that which I might regret hereafter."

"Hence, hence!" he retorted boldly enough. "There is more already on your soul than—"

He stopped abruptly. Almost unconsciously I had half drawn my dagger, and his eyes caught the glitter of steel. The colour left his cheeks, and he fell back mumbling some Latin fragments.

I laughed at his sudden fears, and pushing back my poniard I turned to depart. The crowd made a way for me in silence, and thus I passed out of his presence. I retraced my way to the city which half-an-hour earlier I had left in the company of him who now lay between life and death, tended by a vulgar rabble and a Capuchin monk.

The sun was setting as I passed beneath the arch of the Heinrichsthor, and little did I dream of all that would come to pass before it rose again, or of how the dawn would find me.

I stalked moodily along towards the inn of the Sword and Crown, where, methought, I was likely to find an evening's entertainment.

In my heart I carried many an evil thought against the priest who had dared to beard me in public, and launch upon my head his puerile malediction, but scarcely one for the poor wretch I had transixed, and who—for aught I knew or cared—might die before morning.

From the scene of my encounter to the Sword and Crown inn I had come direct, and at a fair pace, yet the news of what had taken place was there before me. Even as I set my foot upon the lintel, old Armstadt came hurrying forward, his wonted suave and obsequious manner laid aside and replaced by a rude and offensive bearing that was new to me.

"Not into my house, Master von Huldenstein," he cried harshly, barring my way with his burly frame. "You shall find no fresh victims beneath my roof."

This was plain speaking—and from a scullion to whose house I had brought endless custom! Herrgott! had I lived to be refused admittance to a tavern, and insulted by a gutter-bred wine-seller?"

"Sacrament! You do not mince your words, you knave. Stand aside!" I thundered advancing a step.

But he did not budge.

"This house is mine," he answered insolently, "and mine it is to guard its reputation. Shall I have it said that the Sword and Crown is a harbour for assassins and deriders of priests? Away with you!"

For a moment I looked about me in doubt, anger bidding me punish the insolent hound as he deserved, prudence telling me to begone.

Three or four passers-by had already stopped, curious to see the outcome of this unusual altercation. To own myself beaten and withdraw beneath their eyes was hurtful to my pride. And yet, to linger and persist in a desperate endeavour might provoke a scene from which withdrawal would be still more humiliating.

With a dull feeling of baffled rage, I realised that I must go; and so I went with the best show of dignity I could muster, and watching to see if any of the onlookers dared to comment upon my going. By my soul, if one of them had so much as smiled I would have picked a quarrel with him. But knowing me, they were wise, and let me go in peace.

Clearly I realised as I quitted the threshold of the Sword and Crown, how the wine-shop was from that hour symbolical to me of the attitude of all Schwerlingen. The town was closed to me. Go where I might the same reception would await me. To remain in the capital of Sachsenberg I must starve, and starving is an unpleasant occupation.

I realised to the full how much the Capuchin's malediction was accountable for this, and in my heart I repaid that meddling monk with curse for curse.

A pretty situation, truly! And yet not unexpected. Long ago I had foreseen that such would be the end of the vile life I had led, ever since my father had thrust me from his house in just and righteous anger.

Aye, I had seen it coming. Step by step I had come down the steep incline of knavery and dishonour, clearly beholding that which lay below, yet never striving by a single effort to stay my infamous descent. Possibly the devil had courted a greater blackguard, probably he had not.

Was there any degradation left through the mire of which I might still drag the proud old name of Huldenstein and my besmirched

escutcheon? Methought not. I was like a man who had sunk into a morass—too deep to ever extricate himself, too firmly gripped to be able to push on, and for whom there is no choice but to await the end in the foul spot he has floundered upon.

But if I must wait, I would not wait in Schwerlingen where I was known, and where every glance bestowed upon me would henceforth be an insult. I must go at once! Go where?

This was indeed an unanswerable question.

Then a sudden longing seized me. A longing to behold again the castle of my father in the province of Hattau, the home that had once been mine, and that belonged to all who bore my name, saving myself—the outcast. I grew suddenly eager to see those from whom I had been separated twelve years ago.

There was my old father. Who could tell?—perchance old age had softened his heart, and the approach of death would cast a forgiving mood upon him. There were my sisters; Esther, the eldest—she would be grey by now—and little Stephanie, who cried the night I left the castle. Then there was Fritz. Would he still remember the big brother who had been the first to teach him to sit a horse and hold a sword? I shook my head in doubt. Twelve years had slipped away since then, and Fritz was a boy of ten in those far-off days. He would be a grown man ere now!

As I brooded over all these things the resolve grew strong within me. I would go, I would set out at once! Then suddenly I came to a standstill, and a groan escaped me.

How was I to go? I had no horse—I had sold my last one a fortnight before; I had no money; I might almost say that I had no raiment. The very doublet on my back was threadbare and worn to its extremity; my breeches were in no better plight, and my boots were such as any groom might blush to own.

And yet go I must, and, by the Mass, go I would—aye even if—. Horror-stricken I checked the ugly thought. A while ago I thought there was no quality of dishonour that I had not tasted. I was mistaken; there was still one. I might still become a thief, and demand money at the sword point. But I could not do it! I was still something of a Huldenstein!

Then I laughed—or was it through my lips, perchance, that the very devil mocked my better self? I know not. Suffice it that I derided my own scruples. I had grown over-nice in my conscience of a sudden, that I shrank from wresting an over-loaded purse from some rich fool who would not miss it. I had done deeds as foul if in a different way. Why should I stop at this? To a man whose honour was clean, it would be indeed, impossible; but to me—Bah! 'Twas the only course, and it would lead me—home.

I had wandered aimlessly through the streets during my ill-starred musings, and meanwhile night had fallen and it had grown late. The air I clearly recollect was sharp and frosty, although we were in April.

I came to a halt before the Church of St. Oswald, and stood for a moment with bent head, whilst the Tempter wrestled with my Guardian Angel. For the nonce the Spirit of Evil was overcome, and I turned at length, and wended my way towards the dismal house in the Mondstrasse, wherein I occupied a room on the ground floor. My way lay through the Northern quarter of the town, in which no lamps were hung until Wallenheim became minister in 1645—two years later than the events I now set down. There was a fair moon, however, and the sky being clear, the light was tolerably good—would that it had been otherwise!

I turned the corner of the Mondstrasse with a brisk step, and was already within fifty paces of my own door, when my attention was drawn to a tall cavalier approaching from the opposite end of the narrow street. His cloak fluttered behind him in the breeze, and the silver lace on his doublet glinted in the moonlight. That it was that, coupled with his stately bearing, made me suppose him a bird worth plucking, and—again fostering the vile intention which awhile ago I had stifled—drove me back into the shadow of a doorway.

I glanced up and down the street. Not another being was in sight. Absolute silence reigned, saving only the ring of his spurred heel on the uneven pavement. Of a truth the devil was in the business to deliver him thus into my hands!

I felt the hot blood surging to my head—driven there by shame for myself and the vile act which circumstances seemed impelling me to

perform. The air was full of mocking sounds, even the faint rustling of the wind seemed to hum the word “thief” about my ears.

I loosened my sword in its scabbard and stood waiting. How slowly he came! I put my hand to my brow, and withdrew it moist with perspiration—the cold perspiration of horror. Pshaw! I was a fool, a sickly coward! Life is a game and the dice had fallen against me.

He was abreast of me, walking with bent head, and humming softly as he went.

Deaf to the last appealing cry of honour and conscience, I sprang out from the shadow, and drawing my sword I set the point against his breast, and barred his way.

He looked up, throwing back his head like a horse that has been suddenly reined in, and showed me a thin, aquiline countenance and pointed beard.

His lips parted, but before he could speak—

“If you utter a cry, as God lives, I’ll drive this home!” I said fiercely.

“You are a bold knave,” he murmured in tones that were light with easy banter, “but you are presumptuous. Holy Virgin, do I look like a woman, that you fear I shall cry for help at the sight of a single scare-crow?”

“Bravely and most wisely spoken, O fool!” I answered, stung not a little by his attitude and words. “Maintain that reasonable frame of mind, and our business will soon be settled.”

He smiled serenely, the condescending, tolerant smile that a great lord might bestow upon a horseboy.

“You speak of business, may I inquire its nature?”

“Your purse and jewels. Quick!”

“If that be all,” he said, composedly, drawing a couple of rings from his fingers, “we need waste no time.”

He held out the trinkets, and I put forth my hand to receive them, keeping my eyes on his the while. One of the rings dropped into my palm, the other brushed against the edge of my hand, and fell to the ground. Instinctively I attempted to follow it with my eyes. That was my

undoing. Quick as lightning, he availed himself of my momentary inattention, and knocking up my sword, he sprand back with a laugh.

Before I quite realised what had taken place, and the trick that had been played upon me, he had whipped out his rapier and thrown himself into a defensive attitude.

"Now, my master," he jeered, "I am in a better position to discuss with you the question of right to my purse—if, indeed," he added with fine scorn, "you still be minded to pursue the argument."

I was loath to do it, but there was no help. Courage, or rather the contempt of death, which only those who own a worthless life can know—was the last semblance of a virtue left me. To be held a coward, even in the estimation of one who knew me not, I would not suffer.

My sword clattered against his, and there we stood, engaged, with every nerve alert, and every muscle ready. Then of a sudden the priest's malediction recurred to me, and struck a chill through me. Was that glittering point that danced before me in the moonlight, destined to carry out the Capuchin's curse?

I shook the grim thought from me. Indeed, he forced me to it. It would need all my wit and strength if I would keep my life, for if ever Caspar von Huldenstein met his match 'twas then.

Up and down that silent street we went in our fierce combat, with set teeth and stertorous breathing. Trick after trick I essayed to circumvent his guard, and yet, for all he had a parry and a counter. Moreover the light was bad and the ground uncertain. But in the end I coaxed him to attempt a lengthy lunge; I swerved aside; he over-reached himself, and before he could recover I had run him through from breast to back.

He sank down at my feet with a stifled groan, and there lay still.

I glanced about me with a feeling that was near akin to dread. There was no one in sight.

Then I knelt down beside him, and scarce knowing what I did, I completed my vile task, and stripped him of his jewels and a heavy purse. I arose staggering to my feet, and looked again fearfully about me. For a moment it occurred to me to attempt to dress his wound; but I

dismissed the notion. I knew the nature of the hurt from the course my sword had taken. Why prolong his agony?

Next a wild panic seized me, and I fled madly down the street to my miserable lodging, which was but a dozen paces from the spot where he lay.

The door was locked, and I had not the courage to knock, lest whoever came to open should see the figure on the ground. I struck my hand against the window. It proved to be unfastened, and opened to my touch. A moment later I stood in my room, shivering with the full consciousness of the foul deed. I flung away the purse as if it burnt me. My God, what had I done? Would I ever dare to go home now, and clasp my father's honourable hand in mine—mine that was now soiled with this double crime? How long I stood there thinking over what I had done, and sorrowing that it was not I who lay out yonder, I cannot tell.

Ah! Shall I ever forget those terrible moments? Shall I ever forget how the sudden realisation of the long career of sin and debauchery that lay behind me—the career that had culminated in the vile act just committed—how it overcame me and shook me with a strange, unknown terror—a feeling that the monk's malediction had in truth been the malediction of God? No; all this I am certain to remember until my dying day. Nor shall I ever forget how those dreadful fears for a moment passed away to give place to old memories that were as beautiful as they were sad. I lived fleetingly through the years which had preceded my downfall; and it was just those placid, trivial hours, when we neither enjoy deeply nor are deeply pained, that came back to me with such poignant force. For are they not the happiest hours of life—those hours of mere peace and content?

All this swept through my brain in a few moments, and once again the present, with its peril and crime, returned, and, rousing myself with an effort, I crossed the room and groped for the tinder box. With trembling hands I struck the flint perhaps a dozen times before I succeeded in lighting the taper that stood upon the table. I flung myself down on the nearest chair, and burying my face in my hands, I sat there until a light tap at the door made my heart stand still. I sprang up to listen. Perchance I had been seen, and the guard had been summoned. If

it were so—who knew?—perchance the monk would make his appeal to the king, and the edict would be enforced. I should die the felon's death at the hangman's hands, and then truly would his malediction fall upon me.

Then I laughed at my fears. Pshaw! The law came not with so timid a knock. Again I heard it, and unable to endure the suspense, I seized the taper, and went to the door. As I opened it a body fell across the lintel. It was my whilom opponent, and at the sight

of him I shuddered, beset by a thousand fears.
He must indeed be a man of strong vitality to have dragged himself thus far. Was it mere chance that brought him to my door? It must be so.

Quick, before he could raise his eyes, I had let the taper fall and extinguished it with my foot. Then I knelt beside him and raised his head.

"Thanks, friend," he murmured faintly. "The light from your window guided me hither. I am dying. I was set upon by a robber in the street. He has given me my death wound in exchange for what money I possessed."

"Let me see to it," I answered, dissembling my voice.

"'Tis useless; you will but waste time, and I have not many moments left. Listen, I have something to say."

He paused for a moment, then—

"Do you know in this Schwerlingen a man named Huldenstein—Caspar von Huldenstein?"

"I have heard of him," I answered, with a vague tightening at the heart.

"Then seek him out. Tell him—tell him that he is now the Lord of Huldenstein. Tell him that his father died a week ago, and, dying, forgave him all. With his last breath he charged me with this message, and I came hither rejoicing that I might convey to one who, I believe, is destitute the news of his altered fortunes. As you see, he will never hear the message from my lips, but promise me that you will deliver it to him tomorrow. Promise me!"

"In God's name, who are you?" I cried.

“I am Fritz von Huldenstein, his brother,” he gasped. He added something which I did not catch, then his head fell forward, and he lay still in my arms. I dimly recollect how—almost bereft of reason—I relighted the taper, and closely scanned the face of my dead brother, seeking to find some traces of the features of the boy I had known and loved. Then I flung away the light, and with a wild, mad shriek I fled from the house leaving the door wide open.

And that is how it came to pass that at sunrise I fell fainting on the threshold of the convent of the Capuchins at Loebli, and that today Caspar von Huldenstein is no more.

In his place there is Caspar, the lay brother, who in sack-cloth, with vigils and scourge, with fasting and prayer, seeks to make some atonement for the past; whilst waiting for the hour of his deliverance from the mental anguish for which there is only one cure.

The Red Owl

Royal Magazine, August 1900

My Lord Cardinal was beside himself with passion. His face was livid; his dark eyes seemed full of uncanny yellow flames, and his long, white fingers kept tugging at his stiff grey beard, which almost seemed to bristle as I watched him.

"I will find the hound," he muttered. "I will find him if every house in Paris has to be torn from its foundation!"

I had earned during my thirty years of life the reputation of a brave man, quick alike with sword and tongue—but upon this occasion I fear me that I belied my reputation.

In a moment of levity, spurred by the praises of Richelieu, which I had heard fall from the lips of one of those cardinalists whom I hated, I had dared to vent my feelings in a poetic satire of twenty stanzas. I had called my poem "The Red Owl," and albeit my craft as a poet was of a sorry character, the secret detestation in which the Cardinal was held by many of those who cringed in fear about him, rendered my verses more than acceptable. Before a week was spent they were lisped by every court-gallant and guffawed over by every soldier, whilst within the month there was not a scullion in the whole of Paris who did not know them by heart.

The affair grew serious. An ill-advised dog of a musician, named Rouget, set an air to them as harsh and discordant as the words themselves; nevertheless—so inexplicable a thing is public taste—that air was being yelled in every wine-shop, and hummed in every ante-chamber.

The storm had burst the night before. His Eminence was playing chess with the King at the Louvre. With one of his bishops he had imperilled Louis' queen, and as he lay back in his chair to await the Royal move, some pestilent croaker must perforce pass under the window singing that infernal song.

The Cardinal pricked up his ears at the sound, then turning to Saint Simon who stood at his elbow:

"What is this new air that seems so much in vogue at present?"

A dead silence followed the question, during which the twitching of St. Simon's face was fearful to look upon. Then a page who stood by the door was apparently taken ill. He clapped his hand to his mouth, from which there came a stifling gurgle, He staggered, caught his foot on something, and crashed against an ornamental suit of armour, dragging it with him to the ground. Not content with the noise he had made in falling, he lay on his back emitting shriek after shriek of wild, unearthly laughter.

Nothing is so contagious as mirth. In the twinkling of an eye the train which that accursed page had fired wrought irreparable damage, and the suppressed merriment of the company spluttered for a moment, then exploded.

Now, whatever Richelieu may have been, he was not a fool. His piercing eye scanned each distorted face with a look of contempt, which told me that he had more than half guessed the riddle of their amusement.

It is a mystery to me how I contrived to remain in the room without betraying myself by my sober countenance. Fortunately the Cardinal's scrutiny of those about him was brief and contemptuously careless.

Without a word he calmly turned his attention once more to the chess-board, and waited for the King to move. But when the game was over, he got himself a copy of the verses in one of those mysterious and far-reaching ways at his command.

Next day I was visited by a lieutenant of Richelieu's Guards with a message from His Eminence that I was to attend him at once at the Palais Cardinal.

Albeit we were in June, a cold shiver ran through me at the summons, which I dared not disobey.

And that is how I came to find myself in the unenviable position whereof I write, face to face with the irate Cardinal, who threatened to have the author of the verses I had written broken on the wheel.

It restored in part my courage to find that I was unsuspected, and that Richelieu had merely sent for me in the hope that what he pleased to term my astuteness would aid him in his search for the culprit. I may mention that he held a great opinion of my judgment ever since I had unmasked that plot against his life which is known as the "Conspiracy of Pont St. Michel"; for, at the time of that conspiracy, I had held a lieutenancy in his guards which I had since relinquished in order to accept the commission in the dragoons which the King had graciously accorded me.

It was owing in a measure to that erstwhile appointment of mine in his guards that His Eminence still continued to honour me by employing my services. I had it in my heart to wish, as I stood before him now, that I had left the conspirators to carry out their work unmolested, for I knew him too well to expect mercy for the poor poet who had held him up to ridicule, and struck so deeply at his pride.

"Have you read the verses?" Richelieu inquired suddenly, holding up a copy of the fateful manuscript.

"I have not, Your Eminence," I answered without a blush.

"Then do so, Rouvroy," he said, "if you have the patience, which indeed, I doubt in a man of your taste. They are abominable drivel. I can understand the popularity they have attained in the wine shops, for I could swear that they were written by some drunken soldier, and, what is more, written when he was drunk, if one may judge by the stumbling rhythm."

My blood boiled at the sneers he thus launched upon my work, and in the heat of the moment I so forgot myself as to remark:

"I thought them smooth enough, your Eminence."

He eyed me for a second in blank surprise.

"I understood you to say that you had not read them," he remarked coldly.

The sweat seemed to burst through every pore of my body as I realised how unhappy had been my remark.

"But I have heard them sung in the streets, Monsigneur," I hastened to explain.

"Ah, true, true," he murmured; "and you told me nothing of it, Rouvroy! That was unkind of you; we might have had this fatuous minstrel ornamenting Montfauçon, or pondering over some fanciful translation of the 'De Profundis' in a dungeon of the Bastille, ere now—eh?" he cried with a chuckle that made my flesh creep. "But never fear, Rouvroy, we shall have him yet—this writer of epics—and when we have him"—his tone became a snarl, and his hands tightened viciously over the manuscript he held—"we will break him on the wheel—will we not, Chevalier?"

"Indeed I trust so, your Eminence," I answered with a shudder.

Thereafter he questioned me closely concerning the poem, and he seemed disappointed to find that I could throw no light upon the matter. In truth, what with his questions and his disappointment he angered me not a little, and had my position in the matter been a less delicate one, I should have asked him whether he desired to insult me by counting me among the spies he told me that he had at work. As it was I deemed it best to preserve a smiling countenance, until, in the end, he grew sick of my ignorance, and dismissed me, giving me his ring to kiss, and murmuring a valedictory "benedicat vos."

Now, albeit, when I left the Palais Cardinal my thoughts were gloomy enough, in the evening I found myself making merry with half-a-dozen roysterers at Valençon's, and turning my interview with Richelieu into a pretty story, which provoked many an uproarious burst of laughter.

And when I depicted the Cardinal's rage (without yet betraying my authorship), my uncle, the Duc de St. Simon, who was present, was the only one who took no part in the hilarity my narrative excited. On the contrary, his stern face became sterner as we became more boisterous.

He took an early opportunity of speaking to me alone, and then I noticed that there was an ominous solemnity in his manner.

“Claude,” he said, laying his hand upon my shoulder, “you were unwise to write that satire, but you must be mad to make a jest of your interview with the Cardinal. ‘Tis a sorry business, nephew, and I marvel greatly that you have the heart to laugh and make merry over it when at any moment your life may pay the penalty.”

“‘Tis a bad philosophy, monsieur, that teaches us to brood to-day over the thought of a possible death to-morrow, and one which a soldier cannot understand.”

“A plague on your philosophy, sir,” he answered with a grimace. “What philosophy was it made a poet of you? The Cardinal’s spies,” he continued, “are at work in every quarter. At any instant you may stand revealed to His Eminence as the author of ‘L’Hibou Rouge.’ What then, my friend, eh?”

And he made a significant and discomposing gesture by drawing his fingers gently across his throat. I shuddered despite myself, noting which:

“You may indeed tremble, nephew,” he cried; “but harkee! Last night when that disastrous affair occurred at the Louvre”—and at the memory of it he could not repress a smile—”I foresaw what would ensue, and determined to send you a journey, which you must indeed undertake if you wish to escape the gallows. A trusty messenger is required to carry certain documents and a verbal message to His Majesty, Gutave Adolphe of Sweden. I obtained leave from the King two hours ago to entrust you with the mission.”

A cry of joy escaped me.

“Your Grace has saved me!” I exclaimed.

“I sincerely hope so. You will start to-morrow, as early as you choose. Come to my hotel at noon, and I will give you your orders, and an escort of six troopers. You can send them back when you reach Stockholm. As for yourself, you will no doubt find sufficient interest at the Swedish court to detain you there until this affair is forgotten, or until I summon you to Paris. You understand?”

“Perfectly. How can I show my gratitude?”

He gazed at me for a moment with a twinkle in his roguish old eye.

“Hum—by writing no more poetry,” he answered drily.

When a few moments later I rejoined Valençon and the others I was as blithe as a lark at dawn. Now when a man is merry he is wont to be thirsty besides; and as my joy was great so was my thirst excessive. Hence the events of that night are involved in a nebulous atmosphere which does not permit my retrospective glance to behold them over clearly.

Suffice it that after we had pledged every man and woman our memories could hit upon as deserving of a toast, and drunk confusion to "The Red Owl," by which sobriquet my lord Cardinal was now popularly known, I took my leave, and set out afoot and with unsteady gait to find my way home and prepare for the morrow's journey.

But the wine had drowned my wit so utterly that, as I stumbled up the Rue St. Antoine, I raised my voice and sang à pleine gorge the first lines of my satire.

There's an owl from church,
That hath found a perch
On the back of the royal throne,
With a crafty head
And a robe of red,
And a dismally hooting tone.

Then, as I paused for breath, I was startled to hear a deep voice take up the thread of my song.

All honest folk pray
That this red owl may
To the devil take flight ere long.
To hang him we hope,
With a good stout rope
On his gibbet at Montfauçon!

A moment later a tall and gaily dressed cavalier, in whom I recognised my friend De Merval, stood beside me, and pausing in his vociferations, greeted me with a hearty laugh.

I took him by the arm, and having grown thirsty again, I dragged him to the nearest cabaret, and there, over a bottle of red Anjou, I let my tongue run wild. I remember that he asked me if I knew the author of the song, to which I answered that the Cardinal would give his ears to know as much as I did on that score.

I dimly recollect that as I made this foolish statement the knave who was attending to our wants bent over the table, and eyed me for a moment with great scrutiny, then asked me bluntly if I were in earnest. Naturally I grew angry that a tavern servant should dare to join in the conversation of gentlemen, and ordered him away with small waste of compliments. But as the knave stirred not fast enough to please my mood, I hurled a bottle at him, then springing up with my sword already half unsheathed, I would have made short work of him had not de Merval caught me in his arms. And as he bore me forcibly out into the street, he stilled my frantic struggles by whispering in my ear:

"Be calm, Rouvroy! 'Tis Moinier, the Cardinal's spy!"

The words fell on me like icy water upon an overheated man. I realised fully what a fool I was for having let such words be overheard, and I shudder to think of what I might have added had not Moinier's excessive eagerness checked the tide of conversation.

It need, therefore, cause no wonder that I was at my uncle's hotel at an earlier hour next day than the one which he had appointed, nor yet that I effected my departure from Paris without taking leave of my Lord Cardinal.

I did not breathe freely until I was out of France, for at every moment I expected to be confronted with some potent messenger who would bid me return to Paris and acquaint His Eminence with the meaning of those rash words spoken in the presence of Moinier.

But—as I afterwards learnt—it was not until twenty-four hours after my departure, and when I was already well beyond pursuit, that the Cardinal was informed of my absence. The letters which I received at Stockholm from my uncle gave me certain tidings concerningRichelieu's attitude, calculated to quench any eagerness of mine to return. Indeed, I might have been well content with the Swedish Court, and minded to

remain there for many a day, as St. Simon advised, had it not been for Antoinette de Rémy, whom I had left in Paris.

As it was, home-sickness beset me after two months absence, and I spent my days in endless sighings over the portrait of my lady, and vaguely wondered as to what she thought of my sudden disappearance—for in my haste I had dared to indulge in no leave-taking. I had sent her a message by my faithful friend Gaston de Brissac—the one man in all Paris who, besides my uncle, knew me for the author of "The Red Owl." But to that message no answer came to me at Stockholm, and this lack of news of her I loved, was proving a somewhat heavy burden to my spirit.

I knew not how much longer I should have endured my banishment, had not at last a letter reached me, brought by a gentleman of the court of Louis XIII, who chanced to journey to Stockholm some three months after my arrival there. The letter ran as follows:

> "MY BELOVED CLAUDE,—Why am I without news of you? Why do you not come to me? I am in despair. My father has promised my hand to Monsieur de Chevalier Gaston de Brissac, and I am being forced into this hateful marriage. If you have not forgotten me, as they say; if you still love me, tarry not, but come at once and rescue your distressed—ANTOINETTE."

I set the letter on the table and pinned it there with my clenched hand, whilst I turned the strange news over in my mind.

Brissac, of all men! …Brissac, who, for all his sins—and they were numerous indeed—I had loved and trusted as my dearest friend! Brissac knew how my affection stood. He would not serve a friend so scurvy a trick.

Moreover, it was preposterous that the Comte de Rémy should compel his daughter to wed Brissac—Brissac the duelist, the gamester, the libertine, the pauper.

This much I said to M. de Presnil.

"From what I have observed, Chevalier," he answered, "I gather that Brissac is possessed of some secret concerning M. de Rémy—the Count was ever a plotter, with an unhealthy penchant towards Orleans."

“Pardieu!” I ejaculated. “I understand. Brissac has forced the Count to give him his daughter in marriage in exchange for his silence. I left Paris, M. de Presnil, because I was possessed of certain information, which my uncle informs me, my Lord Cardinal will drag from me by torture if he can seize me. But as God lives, Monsieur, I shall be back in Paris before the month is out—Cardinal or no Cardinal.”

I left Stockholm that very night, and a week later I set sail from Gottenburg. Another week and I was landed at Antwerp. Then away—as fast as whip and spur could drive horseflesh—for Paris. Madly I went, through Termonde, Ninove, Valenciennes, Cambrai and St. Quentin, nourished by a fever of haste that made me crave but scant food or rest.

And so it befell that on the nineteenth day after my departure from Stockholm, I drew rein—grimy with sweat and dust, haggard, parched and travel worn—at the gates of the Hotel St. Simon in the Rue St. Honoré. Yet when in answer to my inquiries, a lacquey informed that M. le Duc was in the library with the Chevalier de Brissac, I forgot fatigue and grime, and more like one freshly out of bed than from the saddle, I bounded up the stairs, shaking a cloud of dust from my boots at every stride. I paused a moment outside the library to prepare myself for what must inevitably follow; then turning the handle without warning, I opened the door and entered.

My uncle and M. de Brissac were seated at a table with a backgammon board between them, intent upon the game.

“What the—” began my uncle peevishly; then, recognising his nephew behind my mask of dust—”Claude!” he gasped, digging his hands into his portly sides, and bending upon me a look of ineffable surprise. “What new folly is this?”

“‘Tis no folly, sir,” I answered, with a certain dignity in my meekness. “My honour demanded my immediate return.”

De Brissac, upon whose face I kept my eyes, paled slightly at the words, and drummed absently with his fingers upon the table.

“Your honour?” echoed my uncle. “Faugh! What of your life? Have you forgotten the dangers that threaten you in Paris?”

I needed no further invitation to explain, and this I did as succinctly as I might, yet without restraining one jot of the bitter scorn

and contempt for de Brissac which rose to my lips. More than once he sought to interrupt my narrative, but my uncle prevailed upon him to be patient to the end.

When I had done, I drew from my pocket the letter that I had received from Antoinette, and handed it to the Duke as proof of what I stated.

St. Simon took the paper from my hand, and in silence he perused it. Then bending upon de Brissac a look of utter loathing, he bade him leave the house.

De Brissac took up his hat, and pressing it well over his brows—"I shall not go," he said in a cold, formal voice, "until I have received from M. de Rouvroy satisfaction for the insult offered me."

"To demand satisfaction, and not to render it, have I travelled to Paris and jeopardised my liberty," I answered with equal loftiness. "I am at your service, M. de Brissac."

He laughed, and tossed his handsome head disdainfully. Then suddenly he appeared to ponder.

"Stay, M. de Rouvroy," he murmured. "Since you put it that way, I don't think that I shall fight."

"Not fight?" I cried.

"You ask me for satisfaction. I have none to give, and I will not risk the penalty of the edict for killing you."

From other lips this would have sounded boastful and indecent, but de Brissac's swordsmanship was so far famed a thing that even he himself could not make pretence of ignoring it, and when he spoke of dealing death, it seemed a natural enough assertion to which past victories had given him the right.

"Hound!" I cried, beside myself with fury, and had not St. Simon got in the way I should have flung myself upon him.

"Steady, fool," snarled de Brissac. "I have a deadler weapon for you than my sword. Monseigneur has a score to settle with you for running away. He will thank anyone for the news of your return, and—Mortdieu!—he will be still more grateful for such information as I might impart to him concerning the author of a famous lampoon." He laughed harshly, then, doffing his hat, he bowed mockingly before us.

"Adieu, Messieurs!" he murmured. "There is a word that I would whisper in the shaveling's ear. 'Tis but a name. The name of the man who wrote the immortal lines of "The Red Owl."

But this was more than I could brook. Mad with rage, I drew before my uncle could interfere.

"You Judas!" I cried. "Look to yourself!"

The Duke no longer sought to hinder me. He realised that I had no alternative. For a moment de Brissac still hesitated.

"M. de Rouvroy," he expostulated, with an effrontery that was past crediting, "believe me this is unwise. Let us rather—"

"As God lives, sir," I broke in, "if you do not draw, I'll kill you as you stand."

He saw the madness in my eyes, and knew that I was in earnest. He shrugged his shoulders and cast his cloak from him. The next moment there was the clash of our meeting blades.

With the first few passes I grew calmer, and for some moments I fought mechanically, a dull despair creeping into my heart with the reflection that do what I would, Antoinette must lose her only protector. I had no doubt as to the issue. I might fence closely for a while and keep his point well checked, but soon I would tire; my parries would grow wider, and then—the end.

It may seem strange to some that, realising all this, I had insisted upon fighting. But the law of the code of honour by which I had lived left me no alternative.

Then, of a sudden, I waxed fierce and desperate. Why despond? This was not playing the man! My fury was soon apparent in my fencing. I pressed him hard, and he gave way before me. Madly I followed him, and I had all but had him with a quick thrust in low quarte. He parried with more vigour than caution, and for a second he was uncovered. I saw the opening and lunged with my whole weight and to my fullest stretch—forgetting it was a polished floor we trod—and as

I lunged, I slipped. My left knee struck the floor, and simultaneously my sword—from which my eyes had been diverted—seemed caught in mid-air.

I saved myself with my left hand from rolling over sideways, then, as I looked up, Expecting at any moment the coup de grace, there was a topple and a crash, and de Brissac was down, too, upon his knees, with my sword transfixing him from breast to back. My uncle explained to me afterwards that, upon seeing me slip, de Brissac had lowered his blade, and that owing to the shadow which he cast in front of him, he only discovered when it was too late that in spite of my mishap, my right arm maintained the rigid attitude of the lunge.

Bewildered by this sudden ending—which seemed to me like an intervention of Heaven—I withdrew my sword, and, flinging it from me, I caught de Brissac in my arms as he fell forward swooning.

In the silence we raised him, and laid him gently upon a couch. Whilst I unfastened his doublet, and vainly attempted to staunch the blood with my kerchief, my uncle turned to go for assistance.

An exclamation escaped his lips as he did so, which caused me to look round. For a moment I believed my over-wrought mind had conjured up a phantom to dismay me, as, framed in the doorway, I beheld a tall and well-known figure in scarlet robes. A pair of glittering eyes met my astonished gaze, and seemed to fascinate me.

'Twas my uncle's voice that broke the spell at last.

"What intrusion is this?" he queried proudly. "Mort de ma vie, Monseigneur, is not a man's house his own?"

"You are somewhat brusque and hasty in your speeches, Duke," said Richelieu—for, by the Mass! 'twas he. "News was brought me half-an-hour ago of the arrival in Paris of my honoured friend, M. le Chevalier de Rouvroy. His sudden return causes me as great joy as did his abrupt departure give me pain, and"—his voice was now cold and harsh—"I hastened hither to welcome him."

His restless eye, which had kept travelling from St. Simon to me, and ever and anon to the figure on the couch, was now bent full upon me.

"It is regrettable that I did not arrive a moment earlier, so that this tragedy might have been averted." Then, suddenly recognising the face of him who lay upon the couch, "What!" he exclaimed in astonishment,

“de Brissac fallen at last! Ma vie, M. de Rouvroy, you have wasted no time since your return.”

His tone had become a snarl, and I read my doom in it. I had killed a man, and His Eminence might, in virtue of his edict, have me hanged for it, if it so pleased him. He would offer me my life, I thought, in exchange for the author of “The Red Owl,” and whether I gave him the information or held my peace it would all be one.

Suddenly de Brissac stirred and clutched my arm w ith his hand, striving to raise himself.

“Ah,” he muttered in a faint voice, “Monseigneur has come to me. I may die content.”

I turned to him once more, and for the first time gave serious attention to his wound. At a glance I saw that he was dying.

“Aye,” he said with a bitter smile, “de Brissac has fought his last fight. Diable, but I deserved a better end than to be spitted by accident. But wait, I have not done yet.” Then raising his voice slightly and at great cost, “Monseigneur,” he called, turning his eyes towards Richelieu, “will you deign to approach? There is something that I would say to you concerning “The Red Owl.”

The Cardinal started eagerly at the words, then moved to the side of the dying man.

St. Simon shot a sharp, eloquent glance at me as I stood there, mute and despairing, to hear my death sentence. Then de Brissac’s low voice broke the silence.

“I was to have married Mademoiselle de Rémy,” he began. “My friend, Claude de Rouvroy, learnt this at Stockholm. He loved the lady, and she loved him. He hastened to Paris to expostulate with me, arriving to-night and meeting me here. I would not listen to his pleading, and so he swore that since I had thus betrayed his friendship and his trust, he would no longer shield me at his own cost and at the peril of his life.”

My uncle started violently forward, but fortunately the Cardinal’s back was towards him, and Richelieu noted not the movement.

“He was about to visit Your Eminence,” de Brissac pursued—his voice growing weaker and his breath coming in quick, short gasps—”to tell you s omething which he alone could tell. He wished to give you the

name of the author of “The Red Owl.” I barred his way, sword in hand. He defended himself, and retribution has overtaken me.”

Again he paused, and the Cardinal’s impassive face bent lower.

“Who wrote the poem?” he inquired in a curious voice.

“I did,” replied Brissac, in clear, distinct tones; then his head sank back, and again he swooned.

I stood like one turned to stone, and it is a marvel that I did not betray myself when the Cardinal addressed to me some words wherein he lauded my former self-sacrifice, which had made me suffer banishment in order to shield a friend.

Slowly I realised how much de Brissac’s falsehood meant to me. I was no longer a fugitive from the Cardinal’s vengeance. I might go about freely and fearlessly as I had done before I wrote those accursed lines, and I might marry Antoinette upon the morrow if I chose. If ever a lie stood to a man’s credit in the Book of Judgment, surely ‘twas that magnanimous lie of the dying duelist.

When the Cardinal was gone, and I had no longer a part to act, I flung myself upon my knees beside the couch, and took de Brissac’s hand in mine. He opened his eyes, and as they met my gaze, he attempted to smile.

“Forgive me, Gaston,” I cried.

“Claude, dear friend,” he murmured, “do you forgive me my treason towards you.”

He raised himself by a last supreme effort.

“Farewell Claude! Farewell Duke!” he said. Then, as he sank back again—”Ma vie,” he cried, with something between a laugh and a sob in his voice, “I may have lived like a blackguard, but I die a gentleman!”

And thus he passed.

Out of the Dice Box

Royal Magazine, October 1900

The dice rattled merrily upon the table, and the two men bent over to watch the issue of the throw, their faces white with eagerness.

At last the rattle ceased—it had been one of those impetuous, half-angry throws which send the dice rolling across the board—the cubes came to a standstill, and with bated breath the men counted the fateful black dots. Then with a half-stifled oath, Stanislas de Gouville—the younger player—sank back into his chair. The muscles of his livid face were contracted for a moment as though he had been beset by physical pain—for a moment and no more. He had been a gamester too long not to have learnt how to lose like a gentleman, with smiling countenance, even though—as in the present instance—the loss might be total, irreparable and pauperising.

It was with a smile—albeit a ghastly one—that he turned again to his companion.

"I pray you forget my momentary excitement," he said wearily. "It was unworthy of me; but what would you, my dear La Fosse? I am like Francis the First after the battle of Pavia—I have lost all save honour."

La Fosse wore a look of polite contrition. There is a weighty responsibility in having diced every night for a month with a man, and in having during that time won first his money, then—steadily, yard by yard and acre by acre—the land of his estate, and, finally, his very château with all the treasures it contains. It is, perchance, a thing to be merry at, but decency forbids this mirth to be indulged in the presence of the vanquished. And so, albeit happy enough at heart, La Fosse's

breeding compelled him to look glum and pained. He was anxious to quit Gouville's society; but here again politeness interfered, for the house was his, and he might not order Gouville to leave.

Stanislas de Gouville, on the other hand, showed scant eagerness to be gone, He sat in his chair, toying listlessly with the dice-box, which he had not relinquished since his last disastrous throw, and wondering vaguely how he might live henceforth—or whether he would live at all. He thought too—and this was the bitterest thought that could beset him—of the beautiful and queenly Mademoiselle de Grandcourt, and of how he must now abandon all hope of ever winning her for his wife.

He tilted the dice-box upwards, and gazed for a moment into it with vacant eye; then flinging the cursed thing that had wrought his ruin, on to the table, he gave vent to a mirthless laugh.

"La Fosse," he cried in a voice that was curiously playful, "has your good fortune made you dumb? St. Gris, but you are the dullest fellow I ever sat with."

"What would you?" deprecated La Fosse with a shrug.

"What would I? I would see you merry. In Heaven's name, let us have more Armagnac. That bottle has stood empty for the last half-hour."

La Fosse mumbled an apology for his abstraction, and more wine was brought, of which he drank half a goblet. Gouville finished the bottle quietly, unconsciously, and babbling away at scraps of court gossip the while. And gradually as he drank, the ice of misery that had gathered round his heart was thawed, and he became again the merry, reckless Stanislas to whom it was said, belonged the wittiest tongue and sharpest sword at the court of Louis XIV.

Bottle followed bottle, and at last, as midnight was striking from the belfry of St. Jacques, Gouville staggered to his feet, and passing his hand across his forehead mumbled something about having drunk over-much, As he rose, André de La Fosse, who had sat silent and pensive for the last quarter of an hour, rose also.

"Let me express my regret, Stanislas," he murmured not unkindly, "at the scurvy treatment you have suffered at the hands of fortune. Come, mon ami, better luck next time!"

Stanislas gazed vacantly round the richly furnished room, then laughed.

"Too late, La Fosse, too late," he answered. "There will be no next time. This," he added, taking up his sword from a chair, and holding it aloft by the baldrick—"is my last and only possession. It is the only piece of value saved from the wreck of my fortunes, and, I take it, La Fosse," he concluded flippantly, "that you are not in want of a rapier."

La Fosse answered nothing for a moment. Then with a quick exclamation, such as escapes a man who is suddenly smitten by a great idea—

"God knows I am!" he cried. "I am in want of a rapier—of your rapier, Stanislas,"

Gouville stared at him for a moment, incredulous.

"Then, by the Mass, there it is," and he dropped it with a clatter on the table. "How much will you stake against it? Say fifty pistoles—the hilt alone is worth as much—'twas chiselled by Le Cannu."

La Fosse went white to the lips.

"Not fifty pistoles, but fifty thousand. Nay more—I'll stake everything that I have won from you during the past month. Every acre of your estate in Normandy will I lay against that sword of yours on a single throw."

Stanislas drew his hand across his brow, as if to brush aside some unseen mist that clogged his understanding, and stared with drunken solemnity at his companion.

"And yet, La Fosse," he said in a puzzled tone, "it did not seem to me that you drank over much to-night. But perchance I did not notice."

"Oh, I'm sober enough, Gouville, never fear."

"You are, eh? Then, by my life, I must be more drunk than I had thought. Did you say something just now about dicing for my sword?"

In a voice that shook with excitement, La Fosse repeated his preposterous offer.

"Perdition take me if I understand how a sword can be of such value to you."

"Not a sword, Stanislas, but your sword. Your sword with your unerring arm and brain to guide it."

"Peste! I understand. You have an enemy."

La Fosse nodded.

"Well—you wear a sword yourself."

"Aye, but a useless one in this matter. Sit down and listen to me," he cried excitedly. "To begin with I am in love."

"You are wasting words, La Fosse. It goes without saying, that in a case of this character there must be a woman. And wherever there is a woman it is a forgone conclusion that you love her. Your susceptibilities are proverbial, mon cher."

"Possibly," said La Fosse—too eager now to entertain resentment. "But the present affair is no jest. It is my intention to make Mademoiselle—er—the lady in question, my wife. Unfortunately, that accursed bully, the Marquis de Belcourt, is of a like mind touching the same lady, and to gain his ends he will, if necessary, have recourse to violence. Would you credit it de Gouville, that here in this very room not a fortnight ago he had the effrontaery to threaten me that if I ever dared to wed her, he would send me a challenge before I left the altar?"

"What was your answer?"

"I vouchsafed him none. I ordered him from the house."

"That was well done. And now?"

"Until tonight it was my intention to disregard the threat, and, should my suit prosper—as indeed I have good reason to believe it will—to marry the lady, albeit I might leave her a widow before I took her home. I put myself in the hands of Mathurin, the fencing master; he did his best for me, but it is of no avail; I am a clumsy fool with a rapier, whilst Belcourt is with one exception the best swordsman in Paris."

"That one exception?"

"Yourself," he answered, eying the slender, dissipated, and almost effeminate-looking young man before him. "Ah, Gouville," he went on hurriedly, "I am ashamed to crave your aid in a matter which a gentleman should settle for himself. But life is sweet—at least, it will be sweet if she is kind. You tempted me to-night when you dangled your sword in the air. The temptation has proved too much for me. I offer to stake the fortune I have won from you against this service. Nay more, Gouville, I will do this: I will set the Gouville estates against your

sword. If you win, your fortune is restored to you and the matter is ended so far as it concerns you. If you lose, I claim your services to pick a quarrel with Belcourt and rid me of him, and I will give you back your estate so soon as you have fulfilled that part of the bargain. Whichever way the dice fall out they will set you in the position you have lost. Allons, Gouville, accept!"

La Fosse's accents had well nigh become a whine, and as he stopped, he held out his hands supplicatingly. But Gouville was irresponsive.

"What if by luck or skill Belcourt proves master, and runs me through?" he enquired coldly.

"I'll take the risk of that."

"Vraiement! it seems to me that I shall take the risk of that. Tell me, La Fosse," he added, "why should I not use the sword you covet, against you now? I might choose to be insulted by your proposal, and kill you for it on the spot. What then, my friend? Who would there be to say that I had ever lost the Normandy estates? Tell me; what is to impede me from doing this?"

"You are a man of honour."

"You acknowledge it, La Fosse, and yet you ask me to do the work of a common bravo? Bah!" he cried, staggering once more from his chair. "Where are the dice? You are taking an infernal advantage of me because I am drunk. But it had best be done now, for there would be no excuse for me were I sober. The dice, man, pass the dice!"

La Fosse obeyed him in silence, and with trembling fingers gathered the cubes into the box and handed it to his companion.

"St. Gris, have you got the palsy, La Fosse? Here goes, and may the devil help me, for he is of a certainty in the business."

He threw quick and carelessly.

"There," he cried, surveying the three aces with a scowl, "I knew it, Did you ever see ill-luck cling more fondly to a man? Do not give yourself the trouble of throwing, La Fosse. It is not worth the time you'll waste on it. Be good enough to pass me my hat and call your servant to light me down the stairs. Good-night, La Fosse," he babbled on. I am a rich man again, but Pardieu, you have the best of the bargain. Belcourt

had better make his peace with Mother Church; he'll want a shrift presently. Good-night!"

As Gouville walked home he was far from happy with himself. Cloak it as he would, the fact remained that he had accepted a bravo's task. There was a moment when he was on the point of going back to tell La Fosse that he preferred to starve in honour than to thrive with the stain of an unclean action on his escutcheon. What would Madeleine de Grandcourt say if ever she knew? But on the other hand, how could he press his suit if he were a beggar?

The thought decided him. He must pursue the road upon which Fortune and his friend, La Fosse, had thrust him that night.

Still, during the days that followed, he was loth to bring matters to an issue, and did little towards seeking a quarrel with Belcourt. Most of his time was spent in the Louvre, and—as often as she would tolerate it—at Mademoiselle de Grandcourt's side. But his wooing wore not a favourable aspect. Did he grow serious, Mademoiselle's rippling laugh would mock him. Did he wax ardent, did he attempt to speak of what was in his heart, Mademoiselle's cold glance and curling lip would freeze him into silence.

There were moments when this woman would so sting his spirit with a cruel word or glance that he wondered why he did not hate her. How often did he not register the vow to see her no more? And yet next day would find him at her side again.

He had all but forgotten the task which La Fosse had set him, and seeing that La Fosse had not the entrée to the Louvre, where—as I have said—the best part of Gouville's time was spent, there was not his presence to remind Stanislas of what lay between them.

They met in the Place Royale one day, about a fortnight after the compact had been made, and La Fosse chided his friend for his inertness in the matter. Gouville was out of humour at the time, fresh from the torture of Mademoiselle's indifference, and ready to shed blood—no matter whose. It needed only La Fosse's information that he had seen Belcourt enter the auberge of L'Epée de Bayard a few minutes before to send Stanislas hurrying to the inn in quest of the Marquis.

He found him in the common room, at table with half-a-dozen friends, and as he hurried through, he contrived to tread upon the Marquis' foot.

"You clumsy, ill-bred clown." bellowed the Marquis, "Have you no eyes?"

Stanislas turned sharply and faced the bully.

"Surely, Monsieur," he said with a calm, sinister smile, "those words were not addressed to me?"

Now a bully is wont to become a coward in the presence of a better man. Belcourt recognised Stanislas, and his manner changed with the rapidity of lightning.

"You hurt my foot, Monsieur," he made answer," and for the moment I forgot my manners. I have no quarrel with you Monsieur de Gouville."

"Ah! Since you apologise the affair is ended," quoth Gouville with marked impertinence; and shrugging his shoulders he turned away and seated himself at some little distance. He had expected thus to have exasperated Belcourt and provoked him into further forgetfulness, but he was disappointed. The bully reddened slightly, and followed Gouville's graceful, foppish figure with his dark, scowling eyes, but was silent.

The evident timidity which the Marquis displayed upon this occasion, proved, however, an incentive to Stanislas, who contrived thereafter to find himself as often as possible in the company of Belcourt. Three days later a fresh chance presented itself.

It was at one of St. Auban's famous supper parties; M. de Belcourt was entertaining the company with the details of a duel which had been fought the day before at St. Germain betweem two celebrated dandies of the court. He was describing the manner in which M. des Cazeaux had tricked his opponent so as to obtain the opening for the lunge in tierce which had brought the combat to an end, when Stanislas, who now heard the particulars for the first time, interrupted him.

M. de Belcourt is mistaken," he said leaning across the table, "the lunge was not in tierce."

The Marquis raised his eyebrows in astonishment, and stared for a moment at the young man.

“Will M. de Gouville be pleased to tell us what the lunge was?” he enquired with a scowl.

“Certainly. It was in quinte.”

“I will confess that the stroke was delivered rather high, nevertheless—”

“It was in quinte,” Gouville insisted rudely.

“It was not,” thundered Belcourt, determined not to be outdone in politeness.

There followed a dead silence whilst the two men eyed each other across the lavsihly appointed table—Belcourt flushed and threatening; Gouville calm and disdainful. Then Stanislas pushed back his chair and rose slowly to his feet.

“You have heard me state, Messieurs, that the lunge we are discussing was delivered in quinte; you have heard M. de Belcourt say flatly that it was not. In other words, Messieurs, you have heard de Belcourt say that I lie.”

“Sangdieu!” cried Belcourt. “You misapprehend me.”

“Ah?”

“Did you witness the encounter?”

“That question should have preceded your contradiction, M. le Marquis,” was Gouville’s diplomatic answer. “It is now beside the matter. I have said that the lunge was in quinte, and if you still entertain a doubt, I shall be happy to convince you by showing you the identical disengage at any time convenient to yourself.”

Those present looked askance into each other’s faces; was ever an affaire d’honneur hung upon a weaker peg? But Belcourt’s answer struck the flimsy weapon of pretext from Gouville’s hand.

“Bah!” he cried with a laugh of affected bonhomie. “There is no quarrel between us, M. de Gouville, and, by my faith, I do not see that a difference of opinion concerning the stroke which sent M. de Cazeaux to the devil, should occasion one. Hence I see no reason for troubling you to illustrate the lunge.”

To persist after that would be to betray his purpose, to provoke M. de Belcourt into a duel.

Bitterly did Stanislas complain to La Fosse next day of his lack of success. Belcourt was eager enough to fight as a rule, but he unquestionably stood in awe of Gouville, and was determined at any cost to avoid a rupture with him.

Fortune appeared to have churlishly turned her back upon Stanislas, and he fared as ill in love as at play and in war.

His Grace the Duc de Sauveterre gave a great ball during the following week to celebrate the fiançailles of his eldest son. The court was graciously pleased to attend the fête, which accounted for the presence at the Palais Sauveterre of both Mademoiselle de Grandcourt and M. de Gouville. M. le Marquis de Belcourt was also there, resplendent in a suit of white satin, and intent upon avoiding Stanislas—a precaution which he might have spared himself, for Gouville was too eager upon a quest of his own to even remark his presence.

When Mademoiselle whispered to him that the heat was stifling and that a breath of cool air would be a boon, Stanislas realised that for once the gods were kind. He offered her his arm, and led her from the gaily thronged ball-room out on to the terrace.

The moon was up and the tepid breath of that summer night was sweetened by the scent of the rose garden beyond. As he sank down beside her on the stone seat, Stanislas felt himself overcome by the seductions of the hour, the scene, the perfume, the music floating out to them from the windows behind, and—to crown all—by her beloved presence.

And she—she too appeared to be under the magnetic spell of her surroundings, and when he spoke, softly at first, then passionately and convincingly, she did not interrupt him with her wonted raillery. Yet when he had done, and stood bending over her—so close that for a moment his long black locks were mingled with her auburn hair—and craved, with suppliance in his tone, an answer, she drew away with a merry laugh.

“You are a pretty fellow, M. de Gouville,” she said airily, “truly the prettiest I know, and you have a vastly seductive tongue. But what you ask is impossible.”

Gouville was crushed. His ready wit found no reply, and he stood with bowed head and clenched hands cursing the presumption that had bidden him hope to win where so many better men had failed. Was it for this that he bartered the honour of his sword?

"You are a courtier. M. de Gouville," Mademoiselle pursued, "and I do not want a courtier for a husband."

He found his tongue at last, stung to anger by her heartlessness.

"Had I foreseen, Mademoiselle, that your ambition is to wed a churl, I should have spared you this interview."

"So! We are angry now? Nay, nay, not a churl, Monsieur," she answered sweetly, "but a brave man; a bold, daring, manly man; not a man with two yards of lace and a score of ribbons to his doublet, and with the perfume of a dozen bouquets in his dainty clothes."

"Duguesclin has been dead some centuries, Mademoiselle," he said in a hard voice, "did he still live you might hope someday to marry. We had best go within."

There was a commanding note in his voice which was new to Madeleine, and which made her will subservient to his. Meekly she rose, and taking his arm without another word, allowed herself to be led into the ante-chamber, where he bowed with averted eyes, and left her.

With fire in his bosom. Stanislas went forthwith in quest of Belcourt. Whilst the mood endured that was then upon him he felt little doubt but that he should be able to force a quarrel upon the Marquis and thus fulfil the compact upon which he had entered with La Fosse. With bitterness he thought of the motives that had urged him to undertake the task and of the disappointment he had suffered, but, albeit a motive there no longer was, there was still his plighted word, and—even had that been lacking—there was the angry mood that beset him and drove him with ferocious joy to meditate bloodshed.

But again fortune showed him scant favour. Belcourt was nowhere to be found. From room to room he went seeking that conspicuous figure in white that he had remarked earlier in the evening, yet ever without success.

He made enquiries, and learnt at length that M. le Marquis had left the Palais Sauveterre an hour ago. Whither he had gone his informer

could not tell him, so that Gouville was forced to set a curb upon his impatience and abandon, for the while, his quest.

The light and mirth about him being ill-attuned to his mood, he wandered out into the garden again, and there flung himself upon the very seat where but awhile ago his suit had been derided.

Hardly was he seated when the gravel behind him crunched ‘neath an approaching step, and—

“Do you seek M. de Belcourt?” said a man’s voice at his elbow.

“I do, indeed,” he answered, turning sharply and beholding to his surprise a lacquey, “can you tell me where I may find him?”

“I escorted him to his carriage half an hour ago Monsieur; he was met by two men to whom I heard him give as a rendez-vous the Rue du Guet at midnight.”

In an instant Gouville was upon his feet, and, having rewarded the fellow for his information, he went within to get his cloak and sword. It wanted a quarter of an hour to midnight, so that there was just time for him to reach the Rue du Guet afoot.

He dismissed his carriage at the door of the Palais Sauveterre, feeling himself beset by that restlessness which impels a man to physical action.Thinking of many things, and cursing most, he stalked moodily along until he had reached the corner of the Rue du Guet, when suddenly his attention was arrested by a woman’s cry for help. As he paused to listen, the cry was repeated, and so piteously that it drove all thoughts of Belcourt from Gouville’s mind, and without another moment’s delay, he set off at a run in the direction of the sound, drawing his sword as he went.

Not two hundred yards down the street he came upon a coach, from which three men were endeavouring to drag a resisting woman. The body of a man lay inert upon the ground, and Stanislas was quick to surmise him to be the luckless coachman.

He was upon the ruffians before they suspected his approach, and had run his sword through the nearest of them ere the fellow could draw.

Alarmed by this sudden and unlooked-for interference, the other two sprang back from the coach, and one of them plucking a pistol from his belt fired upon the intruder. But in his haste he aimed too high, and

before he could repair his error the point of Gouville's sword was protruding from his back.

So quickly had it all taken place that Stanislas had disengaged his blade and stood ready for the third, before the fellow had got out his sword. He might have fallen upon him and slain him before he could guard himself, but his chivalrous spirit witheld him from taking so mean an advantage from a single man. He lowered his point and surveyed the tall, lithe figure before him, vainly endeavouring to pierce the shadows which the man's hat cast upon his face.

"Draw, sir," he cried, "I await you."

The man was quick to comply with so gallant an invitation, and the next moment their blades clashed. It was a short combat, though the tall man fought well and fiercely. Stanislas was his master and presently his sword glided in under the fellow's guard, and the deadly point caught him in the throat. He fell without a groan, and, as Stanislas knelt to see if he were dead, a cry of surprise escaped him, as there in the moonlight he beheld the livid, distorted face, and staring eyes of the Marquis de Belcourt. The rendez-vous which the lacquey told him Belcourt had appointed was suddenly remembered, and, in a flash, he understood the situation.

Then, before he had recovered from his astonishment, he felt a hand upon his shoulder.

"Bravely fought, my gallant knight! You were wrong, Duguesclin still lives, but his name to-day is Stanislas de Gouville."

In an instant he was upon his feet.

"You!" he gasped, at the sight of the girl who stood before him with hands held forth in a mute appeal for comfort and forgiveness. For a moment the memory of their last words rose up before him, and he stood aloof and half disdainful. Then her glorious beauty and the look in her eyes defeated his ungentle purpose. He opened his arms and took her, half laughing, half sobbing, into their shelter.

"My note of hand, La Fosse," cried Stanislas gaily next morning as he burst in upon his friend. "I have fulfilled my part of the bargain. St. Gris, I was in luck last night! The same blow that killed Belcourt won me the heart of the loveliest woman in France."

And briefly he related what had taken place.

"'Tis passing strange," murmured La Fosse with a clouded brow. "Who is the lady?"

"Fool! Did I not say the loveliest woman in France? Mademoiselle de Grandcourt."

With ashen face La Fosse turned hastily towards a small sécretaire, from which he took a paper.

There is your note of hand for the Normandy estates, Gouville. I thank you for ridding me of Belcourt," he continued, mastering his agitation, "and with all my heart I wish you joy of your conquest."

Gouville crumpled the scrap of paper into his pocket with a smile.

"Au revoir, mon ami," he cried, putting forth his hand, "and may your suit prosper as well as mine, now that the obstacle is removed from your path."

La Fosse took the proferred hand, and answered his unsuspecting friend with a brave smile.

But when Stanislas was gone, amd La Fosse was alone with his feelings, he gave vent to a bitter laugh at the irony of it all. He had restored a fortune to the bankrupt Stanislas as the price at which he was to remove the man who opposed his wooing of Madeleine de Grandcourt, and whilst Stanislas had accomplished this, he had wooed and won the lady for himself.

Sinking into a chair André de La Fosse buried his face in his hands, and cursed the fates that had played him so scurvy a trick.

The Marquis' Coach

Ainslee's, January 1901

Paris had suddenly become unhealthy for the Chevalier Gaston de Brissac. Why this was so, it is not my present duty to chronicle. In passing, I may mention that André de St. Auger was abed with a nasty sword wound in that part of the body known to physicians as the right breast, but which Brissac would more significantly speak of as "low tierce."

Chance took him to Autune, in Provence. Chance led him to visit Antoine Moret.

With the fortune which his father—an armorer of some repute—was said to have amassed during the siege of La Rochelle, Antoine Moret had withdrawn from Paris, and come to Autune, to build himself a square white house beyond the village, and dream himself a seigneur.

It was no more than natural that M. de Brissac, who had been one of old Moret's best customers in days gone by—before the Cardinal made war upon duelists—should, when he heard of Antione's so-called Château be curious to ascertain how the armorer's son bore the airs of a country gentleman.

Three months before Moret had married the daintiest maid Autune could boast of, and for a brief while life for him had lain along a rose-strewn path. Often as he looked into his wife's gentle eyes, and stroked the fair head that nestled to his breast, he had sighed the sigh of a heart that holds more joy than it can carry. Often he had murmured fears—idly and without attaching faith to them—that their happiness might be too great to endure.

And now the blow had fallen. Fallen with brutal suddenness. Come upon him like a thunderbolt out of a serene sky. His wife was gone—stolen by the Marquis de Taillandier.

Thus was he found by M. de Brissac, and into the courtier's ear he poured the bitter story of his shame. He looked for sympathy. He found contempt.

"Ventegris, Master Moret," quoth Gaston, flashing a scornful eye upon the simpering fool, "can you do no more than sit and mope and groan like a newly-birched schoolboy when your wife has been stolen from you? Pardieu, meseems that one who can do so little to keep a wife has but scant right to wed one.

A dull flush showed through the tan on Moret's cheeks, and for a moment he forgot grief in resentment.

"I might have known it," he exclaimed. "Fool that I was to tell you of it! You are all alike, you fine gentlemen—"

"And a bourgeois is always a bourgeois," Gaston broke in sharply. "Ever a clown with the body of an elephant and the heart of a rabbit. Pah! You make me sick!"

And before the fellow could stay him, Gaston took his plumed hat from the table and setting it jauntily upon his curls, strode gayly away.

But as he went forth it occurred to Brissac that he had been cruel—that he might have spoken softer words to the honest fool, and even proffered him assistance. Then realizing the drift his thoughts were taking, he laughed aloud. It was something for Brissac, the scoffer, to find himself wasting pity upon a man whose wife had been stolen.

Still, in the present instance, he felt a pity for Moret, despite himself. The fellow was so helpless, and Taillandier so powerful, that his sense of chivalry which—whatever may have been his sins—ever drove him to espouse the weaker cause, was strongly appealed to.

And presently, as chance would have it, the veriest accident came to decide the matter and to enlist the Chevalier in the service of Moret.

As he strode into the inn of the "Clef d'Or," where he had taken up his lodging, he was much surprised to find the common room occupied by a slender, over-dressed young man, all lace and fripperies, who carried

with him an atmosphere of musk, and whose pose and gestures—as he conversed with the obsequious host—would have been in better tune with the ante-chamber of the Luxembourg or a lady's boudoir, than the dingy common room of a country inn.

With increasing wonder, Gaston recognized in this pretty fellow the Vicomte de Vilmorin, a former acquaintance, and—he suddenly remembered—Taillandier's cousin. This Vilmorin was a proverbial coward who had fled from Paris a year before, and repaired to his estate in Provence, to hide the weals of a horsewhipping which he had received—it was rumored—at the hands of the beautiful Mademoiselle de Grandcourt.

He raised his head languidly as Gaston entered, and their eyes met. He started slightly at the unexpected rencontre, and bit his lip in annoyance.

"Well met, Vicomte," cried Brissac. "You are the very man to give me certain information which I stand in need of."

Vilmorin eloquently professed his delight at an opportunity of serving M. de Brissac, and permitted himself to accept the chair which Gaston offered him.

"I was about to visit your worthy cousin, the Marquis de Taillandier," began Gaston, seating himself opposite to the Vicomte, and leaning his elbows upon the table. "I trust that he is well?"

"Hélas, monsieur, I grieve to say that he is not," Vilmorin replied. "He was thrown from his horse three nights ago and had the misfortune to break his arm."

"Three nights ago," mused Brissac. "Ah! that would be upon the occasion of the abduction of Madame Moret, would it not?"

The Vicomte started and changed color.

"You have heard of the affair?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," Brissac answered, easily; "I heard of it from the forlorn husband himself, and it is upon this very business that I desire to speak with you."

"You had much better see my cousin," cried Vilmorin in sudden alarm. There was a look in the duelist's eyes which he did not relish, and he made shift to rise, but Gaston stayed him by grasping his arm.

Vilmorin shuddered.

"I assure you, monsieur," he exclaimed in a voice that trembled slightly, "that I have no desire to rise. I am so delighted to have met you that—."

"You overwhelm me, Vicomte," Gaston broke in ironically. "But we are straying from the subject. I am interested in Madame Moret, and I was about to visit your cousin, the Marquis, to discover the matter of the abduction. In the event of not finding him disposed to give me the satisfaction which I desire, it was my purpose to request him to take a turn upon the lawn with me. Since you tell me, however, that he has broken his arm, I am inclined to think that my visit would be both inopportune and useless. Therefore, my dear Vicomte,"—and he smiled sweetly at the pale face of the craven before him—"I will talk the matter over with you instead."

"But I assure you that I know nothing of it," Vilmorin stammered, "I am in total ignorance of my cousin's affairs."

"That, monsieur, is a circumstance, which for your sake I deeply regret," And he raised, as if by accident, the hand which held his glove. "Monsieur de Taillandier has interfered with me," he added grimly, "and as you well know, I do not suffer interference. Luckily for himself, he has broken his arm, and cannot fight. But unluckily for you," he continued, with a sigh and a regretful shake of his head, "you have not broken yours. Monsieur le Vicomte, I see nothing else for it but to request you to take your cousin's place."

"But—but—" stuttered the Vicomte, mopping the beads of perspiration from his brow, "this is an injustice. It is preposterous, monsieur! My cousin's escapades are no affair of mine!"

"Perhaps not. But he has broken his arm, and I cannot wait until it is mended. Believe me, Vicomte, it will grieve me beyond measure to visit your cousin's sins upon you, but you leave me no alternative. See! Those gentlemen are watching us. I shall be obliged to remove that fleck of dust from your face, unless—unless—."

"Unless? Unless what, monsieur?" cried the other, excitedly.

"Unless you tell me what your cousin has done with Madame Moret, and where she is to be found."

The sunlight, coming through the window, fell athwart the room and was reflected upon the duelist's sword hilt with a brightness which dazzled Vilmorin's eyes, and drove terror into his heart. No more was needed. In a quavering tone he told his formidable antagonist that Françoise Moret was a prisoner in a house situated on the Tarbes road, at about two miles from the village, and within a hundred paces of the forest of Autune. Not only this, but he so minutely described the house and the postion of the room wherein she was confined, that Brissac could have no difficulty in hitting upon it.

Having obtained his solemn promise that he would make no mention of what had passed between them, and promising in return to kill him if he failed to keep his word, Gaston left the Vicomte to his own devices, and went in search of Moret.

The news he bore awakened the fellow's energies with a vengeance. He was for starting out, there and then, and go boldly to demand his wife. But Gaston—who had ascertained among other things that the house on the Tarbes road, which belonged to Taillandier, was guarded by six of the Marquis' bravos, prevailed upon him to wait until night had fallen, and unfolded a scheme which should succeed.

As ten was striking, they rode through the village, and taking the Tarbes road, they cantered briskly along in silence. They were both well-armed, and the angry craving for vengeance in the one, coupled with the wild, adventurous spirit of the other, were like to bring about strange doings before morning.

The night was clear, and—to Brissac's mind an unfortunate circumstance—the moon had risen. It was this that made him suddenly lead the way from the white, shining road into the shelter of the forests of Autune which they had been skirting. They drew rein at last where the trees came to an end, on the edge of a cornfield, and Gaston slipped down from his horse.

"That is the house," he said, pointing to a dark building at an easy stone's throw from where they stood. Moret assented with a grunt, and would have dismounted had not the Chevalier remonstrated. An altercation arose between them, for Brissac was as determined upon going alone as the armorer's son was upon accompanying him.

“Plague take your stupidity,” cried Gaston, impatiently; “two will blunder matters. Leave it to me to get your wife out of the house!”

Antoine cursed and entreated in a breath, but to no purpose, and presently he was forced to bend his will and consent to remain.

Having divested himself of his cloak, so as to leave his arms free in case of need, Gaston stepped out alone into the road.

The armorer’s son watched the slim, lithe figure, sharply outlined in the moonlight, as it moved away in the direction of the house; then, with a heart beating anxiously and a spirit chafing at the inaction imposed upon him, he settled down to wait events.

Upon reaching the house, and after looking cautiously about him, Gaston vaulted over the low wall which ran beside it, and made his way hurriedly to the field at the back. From the description which the Vicomte had given him, he had no difficulty in determining the window of the room she occupied. Picking up some loose clay, he began to pelt it, first with small pieces, then with larger ones, and at last—impatient at receiving no answer—he let fly a handful, which rattled so loudly that he feared it must wake the household. But still there was no sign from the window, and Gaston cursed Madame Moret for a heavy sleeper.

Fully alive to the danger he ran were he detected, not only that of having to take his stand in an unequal combat, but—what to his mind was still worse—of seeing his plans frustrated, and Moret’s wife more a prisoner then ever, Gaston could stand the delay no longer.

There was a pear tree in the corner by the wall, and close to this ran a shed from the roof of which a man of his stature might, by standing on tip-toe, contrive to reach the window. He would try. Wrapping the rope ladder, which he had brought with him, round his waist, he drew off his boots, and set himself to swarm the pear tree—wondering how many years had elapsed since this form of exercise had afforded him amusement.

From the tree it was an easy matter to drop on to the roof of the shed, and then make his way along, with his hands against the wall, until he reached the end of it. The window was not immediately above him, but slightly to the right, and although he stretched out until he stood in

imminent danger of overbalancing himself, he could do no more than grasp the stone sill. The panes were beyond his reach.

He swore softly to himself for a moment or two, then—determined that after coming thus far he would not go back empty-handed—he took a firm grip of the sill, and being strong in the arms, he drew himself up until his chin was on a level with it and his eyes were staring at the black glass. He wriggled his left forearm on to the stone so as to obtain a further support; then, as he looked down, he realized that it would be a miracle if he ever contrived to leap back on to the roof of the shed. The ground was fifteen feet beneath him, and looked a good twenty. To think of the drop was unpleasant; so raising his right hand, he began to scratch at the window, and presently to knock softly.

At last there was a movement within, and presently he distinguished something white; then a woman's face was pressed against the glass.

It occurred to him that a woman who was particularly anxious to return to her husband might easily let herself down by means of a twisted sheet, but he had no time wherein to follow such speculations just then. The strain was beginning to tell upon his left arm, and the perspiration was standing out on his forehead. He knew that he could not endure the position much longer. With his right hand, he signed frantically to her to open, and when at last she had done so, he waited not to answer her question as to what he sought, nor did he even look to see if she were pretty, but raising himself on his arms until his waist was against the sash, he flung himself forward and took a header into the room, alighting upon his hands.

In an instant he was standing upright before her, and gazing into the face, which even in that dim light he saw was a pale and handsome one, from which a pair of startled eyes returned his searching glance.

"Who are you?" she exclaimed. "What do you want?"

"Hush," he answered, mysteriously. "You may be overheard."

"It does not signify."

"To you perhaps not. But to me, who have come here to rescue you, and who may get a knife in my back at any moment, as my reward, it signifies much. Come," he added, peremptorily, beginning to unwind

the rope ladder from his waist, “your husband is waiting for you, a hundred paces from here, and I have no desire to prolong my visit unnecessarily.”

“My husband!” she echoed, mechanically.

Brissac paused to stare at her, and in his mind he approved of Taillandier’s taste. She was unquestionably beautiful.

“Yes, woman, your husband,” he answered testily, “Or do you imagine that I am come on my own account to steal you from the Marquis, as the Marquis stole you from that fool Moret.”

He stooped to fasten the ends of the ladder to the frame of the window.

“You are mistaken,” she said, “The Marquis did not steal me from that fool Moret.”

“Ohé!” he ejaculated, with a whistle, “So, my pretty one, you came of your own free will, eh? Ma foi, I half guessed as much when I saw the window.” Then dropping the rope, he turned to stare at her again, a doubt in his mind. “But what am I to do now?” he inquired in a puzzled way. “Shall I leave you here, or will you come with me?”

Her bosom was heaving beneath the thin white garment she wore, and her breathing was that of an excited person.

“I will come with you,” she answered. “Wait.”

She left his side, requesting him to remain at the window, and keep a sharp look-out, concealing himself if he saw any one approach.

He obeyed her. And through what seemed to him an hour—although in reality it was but some ten minutes—he remained where he was, his eyes and ears on the alert for the slightest movement below. At last he heard her treading softly behind him, and he felt a tap on the arm.

“I am ready,” she said. She wore a long cloak, and the hood which was drawn over her head, masked her face in its shadow. He felt tempted to make some caustic remark concerning the alacrity with which she had prepared. But feeling that enough time had already been wasted, he flung out his ladder and assisted her to descend.

He paused for a moment, when they had reached the ground, to draw his boots on again. Then they set off round the house with stealthy speed, Gaston keeping a sharp look-out, his hand on his sword hilt. But

nothing stirred, and he was able to congratulate himself upon the success of his undertaking.

As they drew near the wood, a horseman rode out leading another horse by the bridle. It was Moret, who came to meet them.

Shutting his ears to the rapturous words that fell from Antoine's lips, Brissac assisted his companion to mount in front of her husband, then leaping into his own saddle he turned his horse's head towards Autune.

"Allons, Moret," he cried. But a great oath was his answer.

"What baggage have we here?" thundered the armorer's son. "This is not my wife!"

Brissac turned in his saddle.

"Not your wife!" he echoed, with bated breath, "Not your wife! Then who, in Heaven's name, is it?"

There was a pause while Moret tore back the hood, the better to behold her face. When he spoke again it was in a voice from which all the former anger had gone—a voice that shook with fear.

"Mon Dieu!" he cried, "is it possible?"

Gaston wheeled his horse around.

"Who is it?" he inquired, impatiently, for he saw that whoever it might be, Moret had recognized her.

"'Tis Madame la Marquise de Taillandier!" was the astounding answer.

For a moment there was silence, and Brissac's eyes rolled curiously. Then his long peal of boisterous laughter broke upon the stillness of the night.

"A wife for a wife," he roared, "Pardieu! 'tis a fair exchange." But his companion did not join him in his mirth .

Madame de Taillandier stared from one man to the other, and her indignation was aroused by Gaston's indecorous laughter. She was not accustomed to ridicule, and was on the point of telling him so when Brissac suddenly became serious of his own accord.

"Perhaps madame will be good enough to tell us what we are to do," he said. "If you desire to return, I do not doubt but that the ladder

still hangs from the window. Perhaps it would be best to waste no time in availing ourselves of it before it is discovered and removed."

"No, monsieur," she answered quickly, "I shall not return. I gathered the nature of your mistake from what you told me. I gathered also that my husband had abducted Madame Moret—and I make no doubt that it was in that pretty adventure he was rightly served with a broken arm. I came with you to learn more of this affair. If you are willing, gentlemen, we will proceed to Autune."

"But my wife!" cried Moret. "She is in yonder house. I shall not return without her."

"Your wife is not there, Master Moret," she said, "I can answer for that. And I think that I can also promise that your wife will be restored to her home to-morrow. So let us push on. I wish to hear this story from you, and also to give the Marquis a bad quarter of an hour when he hears of my room having been found empty and a rope ladder hanging from the window. He will perhaps know what it feels like to have one's wife stolen."

As they rode, much was explained by what the Marquise told them. A slight outbreak of smallpox had been discovered at the Château that evening, and although the Marquis had made light of it, and sworn that he would not move, Madame de Taillandier was of a different mind. She had a well-bred horror of such things, which determined her to leave the Château and repair to Taillandier's house on the other side of Autune.

"I make no doubt," she said, "that what that booby Vilmorin told you was true. Only, in his confusion, it appears to me that when he mentioned the second window from the left, he meant from anyone looking from the house, whereas, you took the second window from the left when facing the house. The other window, as you would have seen had you but looked, is protected by iron bars. It is evident that upon learning my intentions," she concluded, turning to Moret, "he sent someone to take away your wife before I should arrive, and she is probably in the Château at present."

"Then Ventegris, I'll pay the Château a visit to-night!" ejaculated Moret. It had taken much to rouse him, but now that he was aroused he

was bent on seeing the matter to an issue, blind to dangers which had formerly deterred him.

"It will be wiser to leave matters until morning and trust to me," the Marquise suggested.

They were within half a mile of Autune, and the Auberge de Navarre was just in front of them.

In consequence of the detour which they had made through the woods, the two men had not passed this inn on their way from Atune.

It was a small, wayside auberge, usually deserted at this time of night. As they rode up, however, they were surprised to see the light falling across the road from the open door, while from the yard came sounds of voices and of hammering.

Brissac and his companions moved to the other side of the road, and would have passed on in silence, but chancing to glance into the yard, Gaston saw something which made him draw rein.

In the middle of the quadrangle stood a coach, which evidently had sustained some damage, for three or four men were grouped round one of the wheels to which another was applying a hammer. But it was the man in the red velvet coat and plumed hat who stood holding a torch aloft, that attracted Brissac's attention and made him pause. There was something familiar about the pose of the figure.

Then, suddenly, Gaston started. The sound of the Vicomte de Vilmorin's shrill voice floated across to him.

"That will suffice, André. We shall be able to reach the Château."

In a moment the Chevalier had dismounted and was striding across the road. The Vicomte's words had given him some precious information.

The four men were still bending over the wheel talking amongst themselves. And so intent were they as to be unconscious of Brissac's approach until his hand rested upon Vilmorin's shoulder.

"Ha, Vicomte, an accident?"

Vilmorin bounded backwards as if he had been struck, and stood gaping and trembling, the very picture of abject terror. The men stared stupidly at the newcomer, but did not move.

“Our meetings are always opportune, Vicomte,” murmured Gaston, with that sweet smile which Vilmorin most hated. “I am on my way back to Autune, weary after a somewhat long walk, and I find you with a coach. I trust that it will not inconvenience you to take me as far as the ‘Clef d’Or’ on your way through the village.”

“I—I should be charmed,” mumbled the Vicomte, “ but—but, unfortunately, I am travelling in the opposite direction.”

The men looked at the Vicomte in some surprise.

“‘Tis a long way round to the Château by any other road save that which takes you through the village. You had better follow it—moreover, you would be obliging a friend.”

“But the coach is full,” shrieked Vilmorin, mad with rage and terror.

“Then, of course, I must crave the permission of your companions to travel on the box,” was the ready answer, and stepping up to the vehicle, Gaston laid his hand upon the door. But Vilmorin was there before him, and caught him by the arm.

“You shall not! you shall not! Help, you knaves!” he cried, turning to the men.

They did not budge. When the coach came into the yard with a wobbling wheel, Vilmorin had alighted and closed the door, which had not since been opened. To them it seemed just now that the coach might contain something which should not be there. The coachman alone made shift to obey the Vicomte’s summons, but at that moment he was seized from behind by Moret, who had come up with them.

Hurling the Vicomte aside, with an angry oath, Gaston wrenched the door open, and seizing a lantern from the ground, he held it so that the interior of the coach was lighted by its yellow rays. The men, craning their necks, saw what Gaston saw. And by the words which fell from their lips it was like to go hard with the Vicomte. Within the coach sat a woman securely pinioned and with a thick cloth tied about her face and gagging her.

There was a fierce cry behind him, and Brissac was thrust roughly back by Moret, who took the woman in his arms and lifted her to the ground. To cut her bonds and remove the cloth from her face was the

work of an instant. Then, as the poor, frightened creature gave vent to a burst of hysterical sobbing, she was gathered close to her husband's breast, and words of comfort were whispered by a beloved voice.

In one of the rooms of the Château de Taillandier a tall, heavily-built man of florid countenance, paced up and down in an impatient fashion, glancing at the clock each time he turned and going ever and anon to the window. He was stripped of his doublet, and his right arm was thickly bandaged and carried in a sling.

"Ventegris!" he exclaimed, "what has happened to delay the fool? He should have been here four hours ago. I trust Madame la Marquise has not—." He stopped to listen. "At last," he cried. as the rumble of wheels caught his ears. He stood at the window for a moment, then turning, he strode across to the door, and passed hurriedly out.

As the coach drew up at the foot of the terrace the Marquis had also reached the spot. The door swung open, and a man sprang lightly to the ground. He was taller than the Vicomte by two inches—which the Marquis noted in a puzzled way—but as he raised his head and showed his face, Taillandier started forward in surprise.

"Brissac!" he gasped, incredulously. Before he could add more, the gay chevalier turned to assist his companion to alight.

"Vilmorin is indisposed," he said, "and so has been obliged to leave Autune somewhat suddenly. Being an old friend of his, I was glad to facilitate his departure by relieving him of the duty of accompanying this lady to the Château. The carriage met with an accident, otherwise it would have been here four hours ago, though possibly," he added, with a laugh, "its occupants might not have been the same."

The Marquis did not reply. His eyes were fastened upon the woman now standing beside Gaston. Surprise, anger, bewilderment were all mingled in his glance. At last Madame de Taillandier broke the silence.

"I could not endure the thought of leaving you here a sufferer, Henri," she murmured. "I have ventured in spite of the smallpox."

Taillandier scowled for a moment, then turning to the servant who stood by:

“Charles,” he said, “escort Madame la Marquise indoors. I will see you presently, madame, if it be your pleasure to await me.”

With an inclination of her head to Brissac—who answered it with a low bow, and a magnificent sweep of his plumed hat—she left them. When she was gone and they stood alone at some little distance from the coach, the Marquis turned furiously upon Gaston. “What does this mean, monsieur?”

“It means that that is the coach which should have brought you Monsieur le Vicomte de Vilmorin and Antoine Moret’s wife,” answered Brissac suavely. “Instead, it has brought you—.”

“A curse on what it has brought me,” the Marquis broke in passionately. “What am I to understand?”

“You had much better ask your wife,” suggested Gaston, naively.

“Do you dare to laugh at me?” roared Taillandier.

Brissac drew himself up with that formal hauteur he could so easily assume.

“I do not permit men to ask me what I dare,” he said coldly. “And let me add that if your sword arm were not broken I should take the liberty of calling you a scoundrel—.”

“Monsieur!”

“As it is, I shall await your return to Paris to impart the information to you. Good-night!”

And turning on his heel, he strode away with his hat slightly on one side, and the faintest suspicion of a swagger in his walk.

Taillandier called something after him, but receiving no answer, let fly a volley of imprecations—then went within to interview the Marquise.

What passed between them was never clearly known, but the servant who assisted the Marquis to undress that night has been heard to say that his spirit was as badly broken as his arm.

Brissac left Autune next day. So did Moret and his wife.

Tommy

The Royal Magazine, February 1901

At the time that Uncle Harry was thirty-five, I was just bordering upon eighteen, with that vast knowledge of the world peculiar to my age, an appetite that was rather more than healthy, and a moustache of whose existence I alone seemed cognisant.

We went just then—Uncle Harry and I—to live at Stollbridge, in a large, old-fashioned house on the river. There was a lawn that ran down to the very water's edge, and an empty boathouse. By dint of endless blandishments I induced Uncle Harry to put a Canadian canoe into it, and after I had upset the beastly thing four times on four successive days, I began to master the art of keeping it right side upwards with a fair degree of success. In the process I ruined four suits of clothes, and five pounds' worth of upholstery with which the boat had been fitted; I lost a gold watch, a silver cigarette case, four six shilling novels and no end of self-respect.

Uncle Harry had pointed out in the most discourteous manner imaginable that my four shipwrecks had cost something like fifty pounds, and consigned the canoe to a remote, torrid zone that is not to be found on any Christian school maps.

"Let me catch you again bringing half the river into the house in your clothes," he wound up, "and I'll burn that infernal boat of yours."

His words sank deep into my heart, for at the time there were more reasons than one why I should desire to retain the canoe. The most potent reason of all was Tommy. Her real name was Amy Learoyd, but everybody called her Tommy. She was the bonniest maid conceivable;

the very incarnation of Gilbert's "Beautiful English Girl;" healthy in limb and mind, rosy of cheek, and merry of eye, with a laugh that was good to hear, and she laughed often—at me.

We had met at Buxton a couple of years before, and at the time—precocious urchin that I was—I had fallen badly in love. But we had gone our different ways, and at sixteen one's memory is short in such matters. When I came to make the discovery, however, that the Learoyds were the occupants of Holt House—some three miles up the river—my recollections were stirred up, and kindled in me a burning desire to renew our acquaintance.

I became a very constant visitor at the Learoyd's, and for a while I was content that Tommy should teach me to play tennis as tennis should not be played. Then followed the canoe episodes, and finally when I had, as I have shown, mastered the thing, it occurred to me that it would be exceedingly pleasant if, in return for her tennis lessons, I were to teach Tommy to paddle.

Accordingly I made my way up stream one bright summer afternoon, and found Tommy sitting on the low wall of her garden, in a white gown that defied description. I did not mention the little mishaps that I had recently encountered; such a task I took to be both unnecessary and unprofitable. Her mind jumped at the idea, just as her body would have jumped into the canoe, had I not imbued her with a due sense of the caution necessary to effect a dry and successful embarkation.

"How delightfully comfortable," she purred, as she sank back on to the gaudy, new cushions, which I had brought out partly to do her honour, and partly because the wishy-washy appearance of the others told a story that might have shaken her confidence in my skill. "How delightfully comfortable! You dear, thoughtful man."

Our trip was in every respect a success, and it is not surprising that it should have been followed by several other equally successful ones, until at the end of about a month I became so rabidly in love that I began to take a serious view of things, and—although Tommy was four years my senior—to look at life as one long, delightful journey a deux in a Canadian canoe.

The impending crisis was unexpectedly accelerated by Uncle Harry one evening at dinner. He had been rather silent during the meal, and whenever he chanced to address me it was with an asperity of tone that was not calculated to render our board a festive one. As soon as Stephen—his jack-of-all-trades of a servant—had left the room, he fired his bomb.

"I want to say a word or two on a rather painful subject, Charles, if you will be good enough to listen."

Urbane and polished though he always was, there was a strained politeness about him that augured anything but well.

"Ye—es," I answered.

"I saw you on the river to-day, about a mile above Holt House. I don't think you saw me; I was on the steam launch"—he alluded to a noisy little steamer that did a ferry service up and down the river.

"You were not alone," he added impressively.

"No—o, uncle." In my heart I was glad he had found me out. He was saving me a lot of ice-breaking.

"You had a—er—female with you."

The disrespectful epithet, which he had chosen with great care, was decidedly discouraging. Nevertheless, I overlooked the fact at the moment, and made the rapturous exclamation:

"Isn't she lovely, uncle?"

He fixed me with a severe eye.

"She may be ravishing," he answered with biting sarcasm; "nevertheless, you are committing the gravest of errors if you imagine that I approach so painful a subject for the purpose of discussing this—er—person's charms."

"But, uncle—"

"One moment, if you please. I wish you to understand, Charles, that I have cause to be displeased with you. You have not behaved with that uprightness characteristic—on your mother's side at least—of the family to which you have the honour to belong. You have led me to believe that these long excursions of yours in the canoe, which in a moment of weakness I purchased for you, were undertaken so that out in the open air you might, by reading, make amends for the years that you

wasted at College. I do not say that you have deliberately told me an untruth, but you have suppressed the truth, which amounts to the same thing."

"But, uncle—"

"Interrupt me once again," he said calmly, "and I shall give orders for your canoe to be broken up for firewood." Uncle Harry had the faculty of calmness largely developed. He would deliver himself of the most scathing speech conceivable without permitting a muscle of his face to move, and without altering in the least the monotonous inflection of his level tones.

"I do not wish, Charles, to be under the unpleasant necessity of again reverting to this distasteful topic, and I shall look to you not to give me cause to do so. To ensure for myself the peace I seek, and to which I believe myself entitled, I ask you now, Charles, to give me your word that you will not again permit yourself to repeat the folly which I had the misfortune to witness this afternoon."

"I am very sorry, sir, but I can't promise," I answered boldly. "I couldn't keep my word if I were to give it. I am glad in a way that you mentioned the matter, uncle, because I intended to have spoken of it to-night. I wish to—to ask you to sanction my engagement to—"

"Charles!" he burst out excitedly. Then suddenly recovering himself: "Please say no more," he continued. "Forgive me if I call you an idiot and if I bewail the fact that you are my nephew. Definitely allow me to answer that nothing could ever induce me to sanction such an act of folly. You are eighteen years old—an infant at law, and a baby in intelligence—and you wish to become engaged to the first scheming petticoat you come across! If you were not my nephew, my sister's son, I should laugh at you. Unfortunately our relationship denies me even that scant satisfaction.

"But uncle—" I cried indignantly, "you are most unreasonable. She is Miss—"

"I have not the least desire in the world to know who she is," he interrupted, rising. "She is a woman. A woman, Charles, as you will learn when you are older, is a creature that preys upon men of weak intellect with the object of inducing them to commit against themselves

the crime of matrimony." He pushed his chair forward, and leaning over the back of it—"Let me hear no more of this, Charles," he said with sudden sternness. "Since you won't give me the promise I ask of you, understand at least that I forbid—utterly forbid—the continuance of these clandestine meetings. Let me see or hear of a repetition, and I shall effectively stop matters by sending you out to your brother in Jamaica; and in Jamaica you shall remain until you have reached the age of manhood—the age of reason, I am afraid, you will never reach. I am going into the garden."

The threat to send me to Jamaica had been worn too threadbare to inspire much fear. I had heard it about once a week, on an average, ever since I had lived at my uncle's mercy, so that I came to look for it as the peroration in each reproving discourse to which he treated me.

Nevertheless, three days went by before I again launched the canoe. Uncle Harry was nowhere to be seen; in fact, I believed him to have gone into the town. But suddenly, just as I was pushing off:

"Charles," came his voice from the lawn behind me, "I trust that you will bear in mind our conversation of Tuesday night."

"All right, Uncle Harry," I shouted back, as I got out into the middle of the stream, and then made off as fast as I could drive the boat. And as I went I made up my mind that with my uncle's sanction or without it I would propose to Tommy Learoyd before I returned home that evening.

The lawn at Holt House was deserted when I got there, so landing and drawing up the canoe, I went in quest of the family, as it seemed probable that where the family was there would Tommy be. I found them in the tennis court at the back—the two girls, Mrs. Learoyd and a young man from town with yellow hair, whom Tommy was teaching to play tennis. That girl never wasted a chance of teaching a man tennis.

"Hullo!" she cried when she caught sight of me, then added in a breath, "Forty, love," followed by her inevitable laugh.

After that ladylike and affectionate greeting, there was nothing left for me but to drop into a wicker chair besides Mrs. Learoyd and listen to her dissertation upon that profound and many-sided question—the weather.

At last the set was over, and Tommy came across to where we sat, flushed with victory and exertion, and bringing her defeated and perspiring opponent with her, she introduced him to me as Mr. Palethorpe.

"Did you bring the canoe?" she asked me.

"Yes. I thought that you might like a ride."

"So I should." Then turning to Palethorpe, "I can paddle beautifully," she declared with touching modesty. "I'll take you out after tea."

"That would be delightfully cool," said Palethorpe.

Of course, I professed myself delighted with the arrangement, and after tea I assisted them into the boat, and pushed them off; then I sat down in solitude by a clump of bushes, and set myself to invoke untold blessing upon the iniquitous soul of Leslie Palethorpe.

Some fifty yards below Holt House the river took a sharp curve to the right, and round this curve in a moment came a man in a whiff, pulling as if he had a train to catch.

"So long, Charlie," Tommy sang out as she headed the boat up stream. "You can think about me until we come back. We won't be long."

Palethorpe declared that it "was an awfully jolly boat," smiled a feeble smile, and waved a feeble hand at me, then, happening to catch a glimpse of the man in the whiff—

"Boat ahead!" he yelled in terror.

"Look out!" I shouted from the bank.

The next instant there was a crash, followed by an oath from the man in the whiff, a cry of alarm from Tommy, a terrified gurgle from Palethorpe, and a terrific splash from all three. I beheld a vision of Palethorpe's white face and straw-coloured hair, then that of a pair of black trouser legs, as he disappeared. He came up again and clutching wildly at the capsized canoe, spluttered and gasped for a moment, then set up a lusty yell for help.

I plucked off my shoes and was on the point of going in to render assistance, when suddenly a glimpse of the face of him who had brought

about the disaster—the man in the whiff—brought me to a standstill. It was Uncle Harry!

All idea of rescuing anybody left me forthwith. With visions of Jamaica surging up before me, and forgetful of all else, I crawled behind the bushes, and thence I watched the strugglers in the water.

Uncle Harry, who was a good swimmer, took in the situation at a glance, and naturally turned his first attention to the lady. But Tommy called him to look after Palethorpe, who was drowning, and struck out for land unaided.

From behind the bush I watched her undignified struggles as she crawled up the bank, but I didn't venture out to assist her. She must have been puzzled to account for my abrupt disappearance, and presently as she stood up—looking as a mermaid might look, if mermaids wore twentieth century gowns and twentieth century millinery, and crawled up banks of twentieth century mud—she glanced about her with an expression of surprise that I could easily account for.

"Tommy," I whispered from my shelter, "Tommy—hush!" I added raising my forefinger to my lips as she caught sight of me. "Awfully sorry for you, but I must be off. Send someone to get the canoe out. I'll come back in an hour or so and explain. Run in and get dry things on. Hush!"

She gave me a long-puzzled stare as if doubting my sanity, whilst I—keeping the bush between myself and my uncle's range of sight—retreated on all fours until I reached the hedge; then, stooping, I sped along under its protecting cover. At another clump of bushes at about a hundred yards from the scene of the disaster, I halted, and set myself to watch Uncle Harry's rescue of the wretched Palethorpe.

I saw Mrs. Learoyd come hurrying down the lawn, followed by Miss Learoyd, the butler and the gardener. Tommy spoke to the latter pointing to the canoe and the whiff which were floating down stream, and forthwith the man got into the dinghy, which was moored by the steps, and gave chase.

Palethorpe and Tommy proceeded disconsolately and inelegantly towards the house, leaving Uncle Harry on the lawn with Mrs. Learoyd who was talking with great vigour—yet keeping a fair distance from her

dripping companion. I didn't know whether she was treating him to a lecture on careless sculling or inviting him to go inside and make an exhibition of himself in some of Papa Learoyd's clothes. Presently however, when the gardener returned with the two boats in tow, the whiff must have been found unfit for use, for after examining it and further talking with Mrs. Learoyd, Uncle Harry got into the dinghy, and taking the sculls, he set out to return to Stollbridge, wet as he was.

When he was quite gone I came out of my ambush and retraced my steps.

But my mind was singularly barren that evening, and when presently Tommy did reappear wearing dry clothes and a face that was serious to the point of anger, I was still without the shadow of an idea.

"So you are there yet, are you?" was her greeting.

"I certainly am here," I answered, seeking refuge in banter, "and it only shows the lack of confidence you have in your own eyesight when you ask the question."

"Dear me! Well, to tell you the truth, I find it hard to believe my eyes after what they showed me this afternoon. You said that you would explain."

"That, my dear Tom, is precisely what I can't do."

She looked down at me as I lay on the grass at her feet, and her eyes were full of surprise and severity.

"You can't? Do you mean to say that you had no motive for acting as you did—for behaving like a coward? Hiding yourself when people were struggling in the water, in danger of drowning?"

"You were not in danger."

"You didn't know that. Anyway, poor Mr. Palethorpe was. What if he had been drowned?"

"I should say from what little I have seen of Mr. Palethorpe that such a contingency might have given rise to considerable rejoicing," I answered, adopting Uncle Harry's best style of satire.

"How very witty!" she commented in scathing accents. Then, after a pause: "It's a good thing," she said, "that there are a few such men as Mr. Pomeroy."

“I don’t at all agree with you. If it were not for such men as Mr. Pomeroy who fancy that they can scull, there would have been no accident.”

“Oh! You are insufferable! Instead of feeling shame for being a coward, you actually have the audacity to speak slightingly of a brave man.”

“I’m not a coward.”

“Then what are you? Why did you behave like one?”

Clearly she was ignorant of the fact that Mr. Pomeroy was my uncle and guardian. How then could I confess to her—to her whom I had that day intended to ask to become my wife—that I had hidden because I was afraid of Uncle Harry?”

“Well?” she inquired presently. “Are you going to explain?”

“But, my dear Tommy—”

“Will you explain, or will you not?”

She was very pretty, and while her beauty almost drew the explanation from me, yet at the same time, the knowledge that she would only laugh at me, made me withhold it.

“Good-bye, Mr. Burton,” she said, seeing that I did not answer. “I am very disappointed in you, and I don’t wish to ever see you again.”

And with that she turned on her heel and hurried off towards the house. In an instant I was upon my feet. At all costs I must pocket my pride and tell her what there was to be told, sooner than allow myself to be dismissed in this fashion.

“Tommy!” I cried as I started to follow. But she didn’t answer, and at that moment the infernal Palethorpe appeared on the scene. My chance was gone.

When I reached home, I found my uncle walking about the garden, and looking none the worse for his immersion.

“Where the blazes have you been, sir?” was his greeting.

“Been?” I echoed. “Been boating.”

“You are not to go boating anymore.”

“Oh I say, Uncle Harry—”

“Hold your tongue.” He stood before me in the most bellicose attitude that I ever saw him assume. “This afternoon I went up the river

in a whiff to look for you. I wished to ascertain whether you still followed the undesirable pursuit in which I surprised you some days ago."

"Well, sir," I answered hotly, "I hope you were satisfied with your investigations."

There was an unfortunate inflection in my voice that awakened Uncle Harry's suspicions.

"What do you mean, Charles?"

"That I hope you consider yourself becomingly repaid for your trouble by the bathe you enjoyed."

Uncle Harry winced.

"Charles, you forget yourself. You are impertinent. Did you see the accident?"

"See it? Good Heavens, no," I answered without a blush.

"Then how do you know about it?"

"How? Why the whole river is talking of nothing but Mr. Pomeroy's ducking. I heard about it at Widenham ferry. Pooh. I expect it's all over Stollbridge by now, and you'll probably find a highly coloured paragraph on the subject in to-morrow's 'Chronicle.'"

Uncle Harry flushed for once in his life. He could not endure ridicule.

"It amuses you, does it?" he said savagely. "It amuses you that your uncle is to become the laughing-stock of the place, and that a rag of a provincial newspaper shall advertise his misadventure? But why does this take place? Because I have a jackanapes of a nephew who is not to be trusted, who contracts undesirable acquaintances, with idiotic views of matrimony, and on whom I have, out of a sense of duty to his deceased mother, to keep a sharp eye, so that he shall not make a fool of himself. Very well, sir. Stollbridge may laugh till its sides ache. But it shan't laugh a second time, for I shall pack you off to town next week for good—for good, do you understand?

"Oh, very well," I answered indifferently. I felt indifferent. What did it matter whether I remained in Stollbridge or not? As a matter of fact, I was glad to leave the place. It had ceased to attract me.

Uncle Harry kept his word, and next morning he busied himself making arrangements with some distant relative of ours in London for my removal thither. He went out in the dinghy after lunch, and I naturally supposed that he was taking it back to Holt House. When he returned (afoot) he was late for dinner, and I fully expected that at Holt House he had learned all there was to learn. As, however, he had nothing to say when he returned, I saw that I was mistaken, and that the Learoyds had never thought of connecting Mr. Pomeroy with Charlie Burton.

On the following day, which was Friday, he surprised me by going out in the canoe after lunch. Possibly because he wished to make sure that I didn't use it, and possibly because he wanted to get away from me, as our somewhat strained relations made association painful. Again he was late for dinner. On the Saturday the same programme was observed, and yet again on Sunday.

On the Monday I left for town. My uncle relented somewhat at parting, and whilst giving me the usual valedictory advice, he forebore—I imagined out of delicate consideration for my feelings to caution me in the usual manner against the insidious wiles of woman.

Three days before Christmas—six months after my departure from Stollbridge—there were two letters beside my plate at breakfast that drew my most particular attention.

The first one that I opened was from Uncle Harry and contained a generous cheque for a Christmas card. Its contents amazed me.

> My dear Charlie,—
> I want you to come and spend Christmas with me at Stollbridge. It will be my last bachelor Christmas, for even your uncle has fallen a victim to those snares against which he took such pains to warn you. This may surprise you, but not half so much as will the letter your future aunt is writing to you.
>
> —Your fond Uncle—HARRY

The other letter which I tore open with trembling fingers ran:

> My dear Charlie,—
> Will you be very much astonished to hear that I am going to marry your Uncle Harry next spring? Isn't it funny? I only learned the other day that he was your uncle, and I was amazed. It all began that day he upset us and saved Mr. Palethorpe's life. He became a constant visitor after that. He happened to speak of you the other day, and of course I was very inquisitive, and—well I understood at last why you acted so curiously on the day of the accident. My poor Charlie, I was very horrid with you that day, and I haven't seen you since. Never mind, I'll make you a splendid aunt. Your uncle tells me that you are coming to Stollbridge for Christmas. You must come and see me.
>
> —Yours affectionately, TOMMY LEAROYD

The Lottery Ticket

Ainslee's, March 1901

Andreas Schumacher had been a failure in life. Moreover, he had grown fat.

To look at the dumpy little old man as he climbed on to his high stool at Messrs. Hartmann, Stoffel & Co.'s office, it would have been difficult to have pictured the bright, slender, well-groomed youth who had come to London thirty years before, to study the English system of commerce.

It had been his father's desire that he should remain three years in England to perfect his knowledge of the language and of business, and then return to the partnership which Schumacher the elder would offer him in the then prosperous Hamburg house of Schumacher & Steinholz.

But a great bank failure supervened and dragged that eminent firm through the bankruptcy tribunals. Old Schumacher died of heart disease accelerated by the disaster, and Andreas was left a penniless orphan to fight his battle of life unaided, uncheered, and unloved.

He remained in London, and Messrs. Hartmann, Stoffel, & Co., moved to their inmost soul by his misfortune, befriended him to the magnanimous extent of twenty-three shillings and sixpence a week. They offered him this extravagant salary partly in consideration of the many favors they owed the late firm of Schumacher & Steinholz, and partly because they thought it unlikely they would find anybody else willing to do the work they apportioned him for less. He took it in the same spirit, realizing that elsewhere he might not get as much.

He had fought shabbiness a hard battle—eventually succumbing—and had studied temperate habits of living with an assiduity beyond praise.

For thirty years he had lived the miserable, soul-crushing life that fate had forced upon him, without a smile, without a groan, and almost (one might opine from his appearance) without a wash. Parsimonious living is not conducive to an excessive degree of cleanliness.

But gradually his lot had improved. By dint of hard work and a sacrifice of everything that constitutes the verb "to live" he had proved himself worthy of an increased salary. By the time he had been for twenty years a dingy fixture of Messrs. Hartmann, Stoffel & Co.'s dingy office, his stipend had reached the full tide of three hundred a year. For ten years after that there had been no further advances, nor could he hope for any, nor—for that matter—did he wish for any. To wish for things one must have ambition, to have ambition one must have a soul, and poor Schumacher's soul had been drowned in ink long ago.

He had grown fat. Not the pale, puffy, fat of good fare and sensuous indulgence, but the moist, crimson fat of stupidity, selfishness, and too much sleep—the slothful obesity that begins in the mind, or in the lack of it.

His character, like most men's, was to be read in his clothes—baggy, faded, irregularly adorned with grease spots, whilst with your finger you might have written your name in the dust on his hat.

How far removed he stood from this world's vanities was attested by his supreme indifference to the shape or fashion of his buttons, shoe laces, and neckties.

Such was Andreas Schumacher at the age of fifty-four, an unclean thing to look at, with a round red face, a large mouth shaded by short, stubbly mustache, small eyes that peered suspiciously through a pair of steel rimmed spectacles, and no nose to speak of. His hair alone gave you a suspicion of the artist. Its general untidiness and lordly contempt of the comb was such as is affected by priests of the muses.

He had never married. He had never thought of it. When he was too young he had not the means; now that he was old he had not the figure to inspire passion—even had he had the inclination.

But of late he had found lodgings uncomfortable. He had moved into a small, dismal house in Bloomsbury and engaged a housekeeper—a decayed lady who had the conventional qualifications of having seen better days and a husband who drank himself to death.

He spent a hundred pounds a year on himself, his housekeeper and his establishment. The other two hundred he banked. Not that he had any definite object in this; he had acquired the habit, and although he might suffer discomfort, two-thirds of his income he set aside.

For two years he lived in this fashion, peacefully, sordidly, and sleepily. Then a snake entered his slothful paradise. He discovered that Mrs. Leighton, his housekeeper, gambled.

Now, men of Schumacher's stamp are usually virtuous. Their lethargy of soul is too intense to be pierced by temptation; moreover, vice costs money, and if there was one thing that would appeal to Schumacher as sinful, it was that which cost money. Imagine, therefore, how appalling to him would appear the crime of gambling. What to him could be more immoral than the purchase of a lottery ticket? Was it not wicked, useless waste of six shillings?

As he thought of all the things that could be bought for six shillings his bosom swelled with righteous indignation. It was worse than spending money on tobacco!

He spoke severely to Mrs. Leighton, and with a dirty forefinger he emphasized his demonstration of her crime.

She was a slender, fragile woman of fifty, easily daunted, and she listened meekly, with folded hands, then sighed and looked penitent.

"I suppose it's very wrong of me, Mr. Shoemaker, and since you put it that way, I promise to have no more to do with it. But, dear me, Mr. Shoemaker, I've bought a lottery ticket twice a year for the last six years. I've always had a hope of winning something, and then, ye see, I might—"

"Herrgott," Schumacher interrupted—usually his English was fluent enough though guttural, but in rare moments of excitement he would take refuge in unseemly expressions of his mother tongue—" you have bought two tickets a year; twelve shillings a year, which," he pursued, setting the matter at once upon a sound mathematical basis,

“makes seventy-two shillings in all. “Donnerwetter! Think, woman, think how much that is! What you want with any verfluchte lottery? What have you won? Nothing.” And spreading his flabby hands before her, he screwed his face into an awful expression of condemnation and disgust.

Mrs. Leighton repeated her assurances that she would have no more to do with such things, and to show how earnest were his words, she put the ticket on the table and bade him take it and do what he liked with it.

But he recoiled from that certificate of crime— which bore the name of the “Fortuna Gesellschaft,” and in large, black figures, the number 5400— and with many Teutonic adjectives of vituperation, he solemnly vowed that he would not touch it.

So, with another sigh, she returned it to her shabby purse, and with renewed protestations that she would gamble no more, the incident was ended, and Andreas went to sleep in his chair.

A week went by, and the incident was all but forgotten, when, chancing one morning to open the Hamburger Tageblatt— which paper was regularly received at the offices of Messrs. Hartmann, Stoffel & Co.— his eyes alighted upon the number 5400 conspicuously printed in the center of the page. There was something familiar about it that arrested his attention. It represented his age multiplied by a hundred, and he had a hazy recollection of having thought the same of some number seen not long ago. Then he read the equally conspicuous heading, “Fortuna Gesellschaft ,” and he remembered. With trembling hands, he held the paper whilst he perused the announcement that the holder of ticket No. 5400 was the winner of 50,000 marks— roughly, twenty-five thousand pounds sterling.

The paper fluttered from his grasp, his flabby cheeks grew white, and his lips opened to whisper the name— Theresa Leighton.

Then his miserly soul was filled with envy and a sort of rage. He fell to reviling himself for not having bought the ticket from his housekeeper without stopping to consider whether she would have sold it, and utterly oblivious of his own moral attitude towards gambling. Like many another he confined his moral objections to the unprofitable.

His mental anger was suddenly interrupted by another thought. What if Mrs. Leighton were yet in ignorance of her good fortune? He knew that it would take perhaps two or three days to trace the lucky ticket. What could he do in two or three days? Buy it from her? No. That was out of the question. She would divine his motive for wasting six shillings.

He thought hard for some moments— harder than he had ever thought in his life— and at last the only solution presented itself. He must marry her. But how could it be done in two or three days? There was Sharpe. Sharpe would know; he had been in a lawyer's office.

Andreas slipped down from his stool, and shuffled quickly into the outer office. In his quiet, unobtrusive way, he sneaked up to Sharpe's desk, and peering at him through his spectacles in a strangely perturbed fashion.

"Mr. Sharpe," he whispered, timidly. "Will you come and have a drink with me?"

In the profoundest amazement, Fred Sharpe turned round and stared at the little German.

"I beg your pardon," he said at last.

"Will you come and have a drink with me?"

Without another word, Sharpe reached out for his hat. He was a young gentleman of twenty-one who cut a lordly figure in the world on twenty-five shillings a week and reversible cuffs. Schumacher was not his ideal companion, but a drink was a drink, and Schumacher, for some mysterious reason, was going to pay for it.

Intimating to his fellow clerks that he was "just going round to the bank,"Sharpe followed Andreas out of the office, and piloted him round to a quiet little house in a back street close at hand.

He ordered a whisky and soda, whereat Schumacher winced. All unversed as he was in refreshment tariffs, he realized that a drink concocted with two fluids must be more expensive than an unmixed one. He requested a small lemonade for himself, and having gone through the agony of paying, he proceeded to obtain the requisite information and advice.

"What's the quickest way of getting married, Mr. Sharpe?"

Mr. Sharpe eyed him with evident alarm. An idea that had occurred to him when Andreas had displayed the unusual trait of generosity was confirmed. Old Schumacher was going mad. It was only when Andreas repeated the question that he answered: "Special license."

"That's the quickest, is it? Well, how can I get one?"

"Thirty pounds, a reason and an affidavit that there's no impediment."

"Thirty pounds! Herrgott!" And he went as white as chalk. Then remembering the stake he was playing for he regained courage and his normal complexion. "What would be considered a reason?"

Sharpe supplied him with half a dozen.

"If you can substantiate any one of those, swear no impediment, the thing's done."

"But I can't substantiate any one of them."

"Then what the dickens do you want to get married for?"

Andreas ignored the question.

"Is there no other way?"

"No. You can lie, of course, but the Lord help you if they find you out."

Schumacher realized that he would have to lie, and accepted his fate with surprising resignation.

"Supposing I get the license, when can I be married?"

"If you look sharp you might do it tomorrow morning. But you'll have to look very sharp."

That was enough. Schumacher ordered another drink for his matrimonial mentor, and proceeded to learn from him what he should do and say. How he should explain his haste to the Bishop and how substantiate his explanation in all necessary details.

Then Schumacher returned to the office, and having informed old Mr. Hartmann that he was feeling very ill, he got into his green overcoat—originally it had been black—and left. Sharpe saw him go, and half an hour later a wonderful story was current in the establishment.

Meanwhile, Schumacher went straight to the bank, and, for the first time in his life, he drew a check. He drew thirty pounds and ten

shillings—the ten shillings he thought might be necessary for his wedding expenses.

With the notes safely stowed away in his breast pocket, he reached Bloomsbury three-quarters of an hour later, and alarmed Mrs. Leighton by the unusual event.

He told her that he didn't feel well, and so he had thought that a few days' holiday would do him good. She applauded his resolution. Indeed, he looked anything but well—the anxiety that was consuming him gave him a sickly air.

Fools are often cunning. But the cunning displayed by Andreas on this occasion might have done credit to a clever man. In five minutes he was able to breathe freely, in the conviction that she knew nothing of the result of the "Fortuna Gesellschaft" lottery.

Then he went craftily to work. He had thought it all out on his way home, and what he said made Theresa Leighton realize to the full how she had misjudged his character, and how bitterly she had wronged him hitherto.

He was growing old, he said, and the slight indisposition he felt that day had reminded him that it might not be very long before he would have to pay the debt of the flesh and visit another world—whether a better one or otherwise, he did not specify.

"You have been very good to me, Theresa," he simpered. "And the thought struck me what would become of you if I die. You are getting old, dear friend, and you cannot work very much longer. I have savings. I have two thousand pounds. That would be something for you. I am fond of you."

He stopped and breathed, whilst she dropped her eyes and turned red. Then he took her thin, emaciated hand in his great, fleshy paw, and with a clever shake in his voice: "Will you marry me?" he inquired, softly.

"Oh, Mr. Shoemaker!"

"Will you marry me?" he repeated.

She was silent for a moment, and during that moment she considered the situation.

She compared him to her late husband. The gay, handsome, drunken Mr. Leighton was very different indeed, and how passionately he had wooed her! Andreas proposed like a jellyfish. But Andreas had two thousand pounds and an income of three hundred a year. Then, what he had said of her position was only too true; she was growing old. Altogether she had much to gain from accepting him. He was evidently fond of her. So in the end she raised her eyes and whispered her acquiescence.

Had he ever read a novel he would have known what was expected of him. He would have gathered her to his adipose bosom, and impressed the bond-sealing kiss upon her lips—there is a world of wooing deportment to be gathered from a novel. But Andreas knew nothing and cared less about such trivial pastimes.

With an anxiety that brought great beads of perspiration to his brow, he proceeded to tell her how he had hoped for this; how he had resolved whilst walking home that day that if she consented, they should avail themselves of his present holiday to get married at once and have a day or two in the country.

She thought it very sudden, but he explained that his holiday would be so very short that they had best do as he suggested. Moreover, he added with sudden inspiration, they were both growing old, and they had a right to grudge every moment of the life of connubial happiness that lay before them. Let them enter upon it without delay, and, if possible, get married next morning.

She was rather frightened for a moment, but no suspicion crossed her mind, and it never occurred to her that there was anything very strange in the affair. What he said appeared reasonable enough, and having no notion of the cost of a special license, there was nothing to arouse her mistrust.

And so, to be succinct, they were married the following afternoon. Andreas lost a couple of pounds—avoirdupois—during the twenty-four hours that preceded his marriage, out of sheer anxiety lest at the last moment she should get wind of the fortune that belonged to her.

At last when he heard her utter the fateful “I will” a great sigh of relief escaped his lips, and he felt ready to caper with joy—he would have cut rather a curious figure capering.

He was rich. Hartmann, Stoffel & Co. might go hang. He would keep no more books for them.

He drew another check for ten pounds, and they went into the country for a quiet honeymoon, abandoning themselves to the all-satisfying contemplation of each other.

At his request, Sharpe had sent him a bundle of copies of the Hamburger Tageblatt, among which was the one containing the result of the “Fortuna Gesellschaft” lottery. He read them all on the second evening of their holiday, ignoring the announcement in question. He greatly preferred that she should learn of it through another quarter.

But when a third day went by and she continued in ignorance of what had taken place, he thought it would be only kind of him to enlighten her.

He was turning the papers over in a careless way, that evening, when suddenly he uttered a sharp cry and seizing one of them he set himself to read vigorously. She raised her head at this sign of excitement.

“What is it, Andrew?”

“What was the number of your lottery ticket?” he cried.

“Five thousand four hundred,” she answered. “Why? You don’t mean to tell me that it’s won anything?”

“Won anything? Potzteufel! It’s won the big prize—five hundred thousand marks. Look!” And he held out the paper, setting his fat, unclean finger against the number.

Mrs. Andreas Schumacher did not look. She sat rigid and white, staring at him with parted lips.

“It’s your fault, Andreas,” she said. “You bullied me so about wasting money that I sold the ticket next day to Mrs. Armstrong.”

Then seeing the spasm of pain that crossed his face, and thinking—poor, unsuspecting soul!—that her harsh reproof had caused it, she forgot her loss and grew tender.

Going over to where he sat, she put her arm round his neck, and drawing his head on to her shoulder: “Never mind, dear,” she said, softly, “you were quite right in a way, and we have each other.”

“Yes,” he echoed, mechanically, “we have each other.” And as he realized fully what that meant, “we have each other,” he repeated. “Herrgott! We have each other!”

And he fainted.

The Duelist's Wife

Ainslee's, October 1903

His first book of verses—"Autumn Leaves"—had run into a third edition within six months; the reviewers had been more than kind; the public was reading him, and he was in a fair way to realize the ambitions of his youth.

Yet Rudolph Lumley was unhappy.

His thoughts were retrospective. They dwelt upon the different women, a transient affection for each of whom had inspired the verses which had been collected and given to the world under the pathetic title of "Autumn Leaves."

Particularly and with much bitterness did they dwell upon the last of these flames to which he had played the moth, and who had married a friend of his.

He brooded so much and so bitterly over this that in the end he took a determination to again leave the England to which he was but newly returned.

On a visit of congé he sought out a friend of his who had recently wed.

"I've only come to say 'good-by,'" he announced in reply to his friend's cheery greeting.

"But," cried Burleigh, "you've only been in England three days!"

"Three days too long," growled the poet.

Burleigh—who had seen similar symptoms before—eyed him narrowly and sniffed.

"On the warpath again, eh? Well, what's her name?"

“My dear Herbert,” said the poet loftily, “whatever matrimony may have done for you it has not improved your manners.”

“It would be vain,” returned the other, “to seek to improve that which the gods have made perfect. But if not a woman—what is it takes you away again so suddenly?”

“The wish to be rid of the society of women. I have done with them for good.”

“My dear Roody,” quoth the critical Burleigh, “however fascinating a pursuit may be we can render it stale by abusing it. I quite understand your feelings. As a pastime you found love charming, no doubt. But you wore away its charm by indulging it too freely, too frequently and—may I add?—too indiscriminately. Love is the sugar of life. But what happens to the man who takes sugar with all his viands? I will tell you.”

“You needn’t trouble; it really doesn’t matter. Besides, it no longer concerns me; I have done with the sex. Women are the most inconstant, the most fickle, the most—”

“Hang it all,” cried Burleigh, “you forget I’m married.”

Roody might, and was on the point of offering condolences to his friend. For obvious reasons he restrained himself.

“I shall probably be in Paris the day after tomorrow,” he said presently, “and I should like to look up old Fournailles. Can you give me his address?”

“I have his card somewhere,” answered Burleigh, and turning to a little escritoire he began to search for it. “Poor old Fournailles,” he sighed.

“Oh, he’s poor no longer,” returned the poet. “He has become both rich and famous.”

“Still,” objected the other, whose sentiments were eminently patrician, and whose cult was the adoration of the useless, “it is a trifle derogatory for a man of his birth to be compelled to open a fencing school and turn what was a pretty accomplishment into a profession.”

“The profession of a master of fence is a most gentlemanly one.”

“Quite so, quite so, and it makes a man respected, which is much. Ah, here’s his card.”

Roody took the card, which bore the name of Jules de Fournailles, the description “Maître d’armes,” and the address “Rue Copernic No. 13.” He glanced at it and slipped it into his case with a sigh.

“I’ll look him up for the sake of old times, and perhaps a bout or two with the foils may shake me into a more optimistic frame of mind. Exercise is a great antidote to despondency. I’ll give him your love, Herbert.”

Gloomily Rudolph Lumley paced the deck of the Calais-bound packet. A look of settled melancholy chastened his intellectual—if weak—face, and, combined with its natural pallor, gave him the interesting air of one who has done with the follies of the world and looked deep into the eyes of sorrow.

That was precisely the air which the poet wished to assume, for in a deck chair, a neglected magazine in her lap, and her eyes fixed pensively upon the glistening water, sat a strikingly pretty woman in black.

Of course she nowise interested Lumley. Her sex to him was a book wherein he had read but sorrow, and which he had closed for all time. Still he could not but observe that she was a pretty woman, and as for the tenth time he passed before her, his sorrow wrapped about him like a cloak, he caught himself drawing a parallel between the color of her eyes and that of the water they contemplated—a comparison by which the water suffered in a marked degree.

At Calais he hovered near her with a satellite-like movement, hoping for no reason whatever that her French might prove insufficient and that he might lend her some of his. But in this he was disappointed.

He heard her tell a porter that she was going to Bâle, and again he suffered—for no reason in the world—a pang of disappointment. He saw her pass out on to the platform with an elderly lady and a maid. He observed the grace of her figure, the stateliness of her carriage, the ruddy wealth of her hair, and again he registered—with a sigh—the fact that she was an enchanting creature.

Then, having almost an hour to spare, he sauntered into the buffet, and delivered himself up to the material pleasures of gastronomy.

He emerged once more on to the platform of the Gare Maritime as the end of the Engadine Express was vanishing out of the station. It occurred to him that she would be on board the train, and he smiled sadly and cynically without any apparent reason.

Suddenly, to his amazement, he beheld her on the platform talking excitedly to the Chef de Gare, and her words being wafted to him, he learned that her mother and her maid had gone on the express, which she had unfortunately missed. The station master advised her to wire that she would follow by the ordinary train leaving in half an hour's time.

She brushed past Lumley on her way to the telegraph office, and some subtle, delicate perfume that she exhaled bewildered him and completed the rout of his senses. Before she had vanished he had resolved that he, too, would go to Switzerland. What did he—a saddened misanthropist—seek in Paris, that pandemonium of human folly, that altar raised to the elusive god of pleasure?

No. It was the mountains, the eternal snows, the peace and majesty of nature that Lumley wanted, and in which he might find solace for his lacerated heart. He pretended to forget that the beautiful unknown with the Venetian hair and the statuesque figure was going to Bâle. How could that possibly interest him or affect his movements?

A quarter of an hour later he boarded the train for Bâle, and quite accidentally he saw her as he passed down the corridor, and entered a smoking compartment next to hers. He was alone, and he spent his time alternately in reading, thinking and going out into the corridor, ostensibly to admire the flat unadmirable landscape, surreptitiously to glance at her. She was sharing her coupé with a harsh-featured woman; a circumstance which though small in itself happens to have afforded the motif of that which followed.

At Laon the poet alighted to bolt an exceedingly bad dinner. He returned to find his carriage occupied. Metaphorically he rubbed his eyes upon discovering that the tenant was the beautiful unknown. She met his glances calmly, and without embarrassment.

"I trust, sir," she said, with great dignity, "that you will pardon my intrusion. But the lady in the next carriage has very pronounced views on ventilation, which unfortunately do not coincide with my own. She

insists upon an open window. I could endure it during the day, but it is out of the question in the evening. I knew this to be a smoking carriage, but I also knew that it had only one occupant, and I thought you wouldn't mind. The fore part of the train is so crowded, and I don't mind tobacco in the least."

The poet protested that she need not say another word. He even went in his excitement the length of saying that he was charmed, and he sweepingly condemned the selfishness of travelers in the matter of ventilation.

His papers he placed at her disposal; she thanked him prettily and accepted the offer. Presently she let drop a desultory remark upon literature, which he snatched at to open a conversation. She had read everything, and held most definite and original views which enchanted him. They talked of the stage next. She had seen everything and everybody. The stage as a topic was succeeded by music and art, and he found her no less versed in both these subjects.

Then quite suddenly he asked her if she had read "Autumn Leaves". She had, and she admired the work. He withheld all mention of his authorship. That was something with which he would surprise her when they were better acquainted. From which it will be seen that already he was looking ahead.

At ten o'clock the attendant from the wagon-lit came to announce that his berth was ready, and he left her—his head in a whirl, his misery forgotten, and with it the fickle cause thereof.

He lay awake an inordinately long time, and his thoughts were of her whom he had but left. It was absurd, he said—forgetting the impressionable quality of his nature—that he should so dwell upon a woman whom twelve hours ago he had not seen. He thought of her wit, her beauty, her grace, her charm of manner, and he told himself that here was a woman fitted indeed to be his mate. A woman that would understand and help him in his work.

They met at six o'clock next morning on the platform at Bâle, and he learned that she was going to Zug.

"How fortunate," he exclaimed, in well-feigned surprise. "I am going there myself."

He did not deem it necessary to add that he had only just made up his mind to do so. They took their coffee at the same table, and the poet's spirits were rising fast. He saw to her luggage afterward, and had it put on the Gottardbahn, via Zürich, into which train he presently handed her.

They travelled vis-à-vis, and all went merrily until Olten was passed, when suddenly—

"At what time did you say we get to Lucerne?" she inquired.

"You mean Zürich—"

"No, no. Lucerne, of course."

"Lucerne?" he echoed, in surprise. "We don't go to Lucerne."

"We don't go to Lucerne?" she repeated after him, as if she didn't understand.

"It is not the usual way from Bâle to Zug," he explained reassuringly. "The direct route is via Zürich without changing."

"But my mother is waiting for me at Lucerne! I telegraphed her to do so."

"Oh Lord!" he ejaculated, adding the suggestion that she had better wire.

"But I don't know where to find her. She will meet this train—I mean she will meet the train I should have gone by; it gets there at nine something. Oh, how stupid!"

"I am ever so sorry," said the poet, penitently, "and I am afraid that it is all my fault. You had better telegraph to all the hotels in Lucerne; but I would suggest that you do so from Zug."

After that the poet was crestfallen. He felt that he had lost ground in her good graces.

Zug, however, was reached, and they went to the Zugerhof, whence he assisted her to dispatch telegrams to each of the principal Lucerne hotels. This done they sat down to await events. Easier in mind, she permitted him after lunch to show her around the quaint little town. Together they admired the Rigi and the Pilatus, and the poet waxed rhetorical on the subject of eternal snows.

At his suggestion they took the steamer across the lake to Arth, and it was evening before they got back to Zug again.

“I really can’t thank you sufficiently for your kindness,” she said as they paced the deck of the little ferry steamer.

“Say rather that you cannot sufficiently blame me for my stupid blunder this morning.”

“No, no, it was quite my fault. I should have told you. However, we have had a delightful day—if,” she added, archly glancing up at him, “an exceedingly unconventional one.”

“Like stolen fruit,” said he, daringly, “our association—may I say?—has been all the sweeter on that account.”

She looked up sharply, meeting the solemn glance of his wide-set, thoughtful eyes, and she laughed.

“Well, you know, mother is not very far away. Just behind that little mountain,” and she pointed to the Pilatus.

“Yes,” he agreed, “quite close to, in fact. Close yet invisible and beyond earshot, like a considerate chaperon. I look forward to meeting that estimable lady.”

“She will thank you for having taken care of me, Mr,—,” she broke off in some confusion, to add: “Why, I don’t even know your name! Is it not droll?”

The poet braced himself for his coup de théâtre. Already in his fancy—his imagination was boundless—he saw the light of interest leaping to her eye at the disclosure of his identity with the author of “Autumn Leaves,” which she admired. Inspired by her, who could say that but before the next autumn closed around them he might not have a second and a worthier book to offer her?

“My name, dear lady,” said he, dreamily, his black eyes expressing a sort of sad deprecation, “may possibly not be unknown to you.”

“Ah, you are then a personage?”

“A very humble one, I fear.”

“What a deprecating tone!”

“Life teaches a man to shrug his shoulders,” he replied, pathetically.

“You are a politician?”

“Oh, no. Nothing so consequential and useful. I am only—”

But a cry from his companion arrested him in his introduction.

"What's the matter?"

"My husband," was the pregnant answer.

And he, following the direction of her glance, beheld a tall, slender man in black pacing the jetty which they were approaching. Something very like a groan escaped him.

"Now, isn't that fortunate?" she cried.

"Damnable I call it," said the poet to himself.

"He was to have joined us at Lucerne, and I suppose one of the telegrams must have found mother, and brought him over here."

But she was wrong in her conclusions. Monsieur Bernadot, her husband, had indeed met her mother at Lucerne, and had been sent on to Zug to prepare for their coming. He had gone to the Hirsch Hotel, where, a couple of hours after his arrival, he had received an alarming telegram from his mother-in-law, to the effect that his wife had disappeared.

In dismay, he had been on the point of going to Lucerne, when, in the station, his eye fell upon a dressing bag which he recognized as his wife's. He was informed that it was being taken to the Zugerhof, and thither he repaired hot-foot to receive the news that the lady owning that bag had arrived there that morning accompanied by a gentleman. Monsieur Bernadot, who was of an extremely jealous nature, fell into a paroxysm of rage. He was told that the lady and her companion had gone out with the intention of taking the steamer to Arth and back. And so on the jetty he waited, his anger white-hot, to receive them.

In a private room of the Zugerhof sat Madam Bernadot very pale and tearful, while her lord and master crossed and re-crossed the chamber in great strides, waved his arms like a windmill and talked steadily at the rate of some three hundred words—one hundred of which were vituperative—to the minute.

Lumley, calm. serene and suave, sat upon the sofa, and waited until the Frenchman, for want of breath, should be compelled to pause, and would allow him to insert a word or two. To Lumley the situation presented a humorous as well as a tragic side. It was unfortunate that he had not told the lady his name after all; upon the fact of her not knowing it rested the present situation. Believe that she really did not know it,

Bernadot could not; he very naturally inferred that she purposely withheld it.

At length, with a dramatic gesture, the Frenchman challenged the poet to say something.

"With pleasure," said Lumley, with a charming smile, and in a French that contained not the faintest vestige of an alien accent. "In the first place, monsieur, permit me to observe that you are behaving in a very ridiculous manner."

"Ridiculous?" roared Bernadot.

"In the second place," continued the poet, calmly, "you are behaving in a very unworthy manner, and you are placing this excellent lady, who has the misfortune to be your wife, in an exceedingly, and wholly unnecessarily painful position."

"Has monsieur the effrontery to assume a tone of persiflage? I demand that you explain yourself."

"The demand is an interruption that only serves to retard the explanation." was the bland reply. "I had the honor to meet this lady twenty-four hours ago at Laon."

And he proceeded to give the details of their meeting en voiture, of the slight services that he had had the good fortune to render her, and of the mistake in which these had culminated that morning at Bâle.

"And," demanded Bernadot, with a sneer, "do you expect me to believe this ingenious narrative?"

"I am in the habit of speaking the truth, sir," said the poet with dignity.

"Your habits, monsieur, are of no interest to me. I do not believe a word of what you have told me."

"Monsieur!" cried the poet, rising.

"Explain to me, if you can, the mistake owing to which I find you taking a trip on a lake steamer with my wife."

"It was no mistake. One must kill time."

"Kill time, hein? Indeed, monsieur has a talent for explaining. Is monsieur in the legal profession?"

"Monsieur," began Lumley, angrily.

“Oh, don’t excite him for Heaven’s sake,” implored the lady, in English. “He is a great duelist.”

This information seemed suddenly to rob the poet of a good deal of his aplomb.

“It appears to me that he is exciting himself,” said the poet with an ease which he was far from feeling.

“Que dites-vous?” demanded the husband, to whom this exchange of words in a foreign language savored strongly of collusion.

“Perhaps, monsieur,” said the poet, politely, you will permit me to terminate a rather unfortunate interview by withdrawing.”

“Withdrawing?” snarled Barnadot, showing his teeth. “For what do you take me, monsieur? Do you think that I am a man that allows his honor to be trampled in the dust, and then permits the offender to withdraw? Monsieur, I demand satisfaction.”

“I have already given you all the satisfaction in my power. If you do not find it sufficient, the fault, monsieur, must lie with you.”

Bernadot grinned horribly.

“There is a satisfaction of another sort, monsieur, which you shall render me.”

The poet’s heart sank. He had spent a very pleasant day with Madam Bernadot, but to be butchered for it was rather, he thought, a heavy price.

“I should like monsieur to observe,” said he, “that the violence of your expressions is frightening this lady.”

Bernadot was very rude in his retort, which he wound up by repeating that Lumley must give him satisfaction.

The poet shook his head.

“What you ask is impossible, monsieur. I beg that you will think it over calmly.”

“Does monsieur suggest that I am anything but calm at present?” he roared.

“I suggest only, monsieur, that you think it over. Discuss it with madam. I am sure that upon reflection you will bring yourself to see the case as I have put it.”

“You may be right, and you may be wrong, but I do not like the tone that you have taken. I have observed throughout a certain note of persiflage that I consider peculiarly insulting. You have used expressions that I cannot forgive.”

“Endeavor to forget them,” suggested the poet.

“I shall do so when I have avenged them.”

The poet shuddered.

“Monsieur, I most willingly apologize for those expressions.”

“Bah!”

“I will take back those expressions, monsieur.”

“Here is my card,” cried Bernadot. “If you will favor me with yours I will find a friend to wait upon you to-morrow. For the rest, in five hours we can reach France.”

The poet was on the horns of a dilemma. To refuse to comply would be an act of cowardice which he did not care to perform in the presence of a lady. The easiest solution appeared to be to give Bernadot his card and start for England by the first train. Accordingly, he drew his case from his pocket, and from that a card which he handed to Bernadot.

“There, monsieur, since you insist; but I trust that you will come to see that a meeting would be most inconvenient.”

The Frenchman took the card, and as he glanced at it the expression of his face changed suddenly to surprise. Immediately his tone became respectful in the extreme.

“Monsieur, you are very magnanimous,” said he. “I will take you at your word and accept the apology which a moment ago I refused—churlishly perhaps.”

“Why then,” cried the poet, in mingled surprise and joy, “no more need be said.”

He took his leave of them with gracefully expressed regrets for the misunderstanding which he had been so unfortunate as to bring about, and Bernadot went the length of begging him to say no more.

Bernadot and his wife withdrew to the Hirsch Hotel, and Lumley did not see them again. He left next day for Paris.

On the morning after his arrival in the French capital it occurred to him to pay his visit to Fournailles, not only as a friend, but as a pupil, for

the poet suddenly realized that a knowledge of fence may be desirable and useful.

He took out his cardcase and emptied it in his search for Fournailles' card. But in vain; he had lost it. Then all at once he remembered Bernadot's abrupt change of manner, and he suddenly grasped the meaning of it.

He had given Fournailles' card to Bernadot, and Bernadot had not unnaturally shrank from the ordeal of meeting a fencing master with cold steel.

The Ducal Rival

Ainslee's, November 1903

Across the serene sky of the Duke of Starlingford's mind there fell a cloud in the shape of a letter from Vavasour.

"I don't know what you're thinking of," wrote that worthy gentleman, "that you don't look after your property. There is an outsider down here, a lawyer chap named Hawksley, who is making some devilish strong running with Miss Martingale. If I were you I should run down and put matters right, or, if filial awe renders this impossible, you might get your solicitors to write to the fellow and explain matters. His present address is Nayad House, Stollbridge."

As he read the duke grew very angry, Vavasour was not a man given to exaggeration, and he knew that he might believe every word that his friend wrote. In spite of the fact that he was very fond of Helen Martingale, he could not deny that she was a very impressionable, willful, and capricious young woman. This "lawyer chap" might be quite good-looking—it frequently happened that these plebian creatures were. That he might possess any mental attractions did not enter into the duke's considerations. He was a man of marked limitations, and his knowledge of the world and his fellowman was confined to that which he beheld upon the surface.

Now, it was common knowledge to everybody who was anybody both in his world and Helen Martingale's—which were not quite the same worlds, after all—that between the duke and the lady a tacit understanding existed; that, in fact, she was secretly engaged to him, and that next year, when he came of age and could act independently, he

would marry her. In the meanwhile a mother who was rather a dragon, and who by no meams approved of the affair, had insisted that the duke, her son, should not go near that impossible Martingale person. It was understood that a distant relative of hers had once manufactured something.

As the Duchess had it in her power to make things extremely uncomfortable for him during his minority, and as he, himself, was a poor, weak thing, morally (physically he had the attributes of a bulldog) a slave to the creature-comforts whereof his mother threatened to deprive him in quite an appreciable degree, he dared not defy her wishes for the present.

But that letter from Vavasour, as I have said, disturbed him. Preposterous though it appeared that Helen should for a moment seriously entertain the wooing of a bourgeois attorney, while he, the Duke of Starlingford, was behind the arras waiting for the hour to strike when he should come forth to claim her, still the duke's mind—which was not a great matter—was far from easy.

He determined forthwith to go down to Stollbridge. And so it came to pass that, having changed into a suit of tweeds and a Panama, he left Paddington a couple of hours after the reception of Vavasour's letter.

On the platform at Stollbridge station he put his hand in his pocket for that letter, only to find that he had left it in his other garments. He had a bad memory—he had really never had occasion to remember anything in his life—and the name of the man he had come down to see was forgotten. He had only read it once. Then a doubt crossed his mind. Was it Nayad or Dryad? The duke knew of some vague connection between the two, and he naturally hit upon the wrong one. He hailed a hansom.

"I say, do you know of a place about here called 'Dryad House'?"

"D'yer mean Nayad House, sir?" inquired the driver, led to the conclusion by the similarity of sound.

"That's it—Nayad House. Can you tell me—I mean, do you know the name of the occupier?"

"Mr. Lumley, sir," answered the man, promptly.

"That's it—Lumley; that's it. Drive me there, will you?"

He got in and recited the name half a dozen times in quick succession, so that he might not again forget it.

"I shall not be in for dinner to-night, Roody," said Hawksley, as he lounged into the poet's study.

The poet looked up languidly from the proof sheets of "Autumn Leaves"—the embryo of his first book of poems.

"That," said he, "is an unnecessary announcement. You don't usually dress to dine with me. I am far from wishing in any way to restrain you from following the bent of your inclinations, but I should like to ask you whether, my dear Tommy, you are supposed to be staying with me, or merely sleeping at my house,"

Hawksley's chubby red cheeks grew a shade redder with indignation.

"I like that, Roody, on my soul, I do," he ejacualted. "You are so delightfully naïve at times."

"Yes," murmured Lumley, "I am considered rather guileless."

"I should like to ask you in return whether you ever heard of the duties of a host? If I have been occasionally absent, it is owing to the absolute impossibility of being anything but alone here. It isn't good for man to be alone, and in this house of yours I'm devilish lonely, thanks to the interminable proof-sheets of your 'Autumn Leaves.' I should say," he continued, opening his opera hat, and speaking in his most withering manner, "to judge by their quantity, that you have collected the cast-off clothing of every forest in England. By the time the book is thrown upon an unsympathetic world, I may begin to think about the holiday I came down here to spend in your company. Had you merely said 'in your house,' your invitation would at least have been a more accurate one." And, setting his hat on the back of his sleek head, the lawyer struck an attitude worthy of Cicero.

"That," said the poet, smiling, "is a beautiful oration, and when one hears your sonorous, forensic tones, and the pregnancy of your expositions, one wonders that you should have been such a failure in the profession to which you have been relegated."

"Good-evening," said the lawyer, huffily, and was gone.

Rudolph Lumley laughed as the door closed upon his departing friend, and turned his mind again to his work. He was disturbed half an hour or so later by the entrance of his man.

"A gentleman to see you, sir."

Lumley took the card with an annoyed air. He did not wish to be interrupted. But the annoyance on his fine, young face melted quickly into wonder. The card bore the name of Starlingford, and though excellently connected, the poet did not number a duke among his callers.

"Hum—did he say what he wanted, Martin?"

"No, sir," replied the man, in tones that intimated that a duke was not a tradesman. Lumley thought for a moment, then:

"Show him in here," said he.

An instant later the poet beheld a young man of middle height in a suit of tweeds, thick-set and ungainly of shape, with a brick-red face of coarse features. Lumley looked with interest at his patrician visitor, and inwardly commented that Lavater would, at sight, have pronounced him a plowboy. He arose and inclined his head slightly.

"You are Mr. Lumley?" the duke suggested.

"Lumley," amended the poet, "is my name."

"I have taken the liberty of calling upon you," said the duke aggressively.

"Ye-es," assented the poet, wondering vaguely what firm the duke might be traveling for. "Won't you sit down?"

"No thanks. I mean, I shan't stay long. The fact is, sir—what I mean to say is that you are very—very unwarrantably interfering with me."

"I—interfering with you?"

"Yes, and I—I mean I'm not going to stand it."

"I see," said the poet. He wondered whether this might not be some escaped lunatic whom it were politic to humor. The man's preposterous statement, and his still more preposterous attitude, awakened in Lumley a spirit of gentle badinage.

"If I am interfering with you," said he, "I quite agree with your determination not to endure it. No self-respecting man could."

The duke was staggered. He had come to wage battle, and to beat down resistance. Acquiescence disarmed him, and he was at a loss how to proceed.

"If you will give yourself the trouble of reciting the sum of my interference, we may arrive at some mutually desirable understanding," said the poet.

"I refer to Miss Martingale," the duke announced, and the poet remembered suddenly that he had heard her name mentioned in connection with Starlingford's.

"I beg your pardon?" said he.

"I refer to Miss Martingale. You may not know that between the lady and me—I mean that there is an understanding between us."

"I heard something to that effect, sir, and I'm sure that it is very flattering to have you come here to confide in me. But may I venture to inquire how the matter concerns me?"

"Damn it, Mr. Lumley, don't you think it would be as well if you stopped asking questions?" cried the duke, rudely.

"It certainly appears rather useless," sighed the poet.

"I am not a fool, sir," the duke protested, getting heated.

"Indeed?" murmured the poet.

"And I mean I'm not going to stand by and see another man pay attentions to her in my absence."

"May I suggest that such a course—that of standing by and seeing things, and yet being absent—would border upon the miraculous?" quoth the poet, playfully.

The duke was speechless with rage for a second. It had just dawned upon him that this smiling bounder was pulling his ducal leg.

"I have warned you off, sir, and I shall be glad if you'll take my warning," he thundered.

"One moment, your grace," said the poet, in surprise, comprehension dawning at last upon him. "Do you lay it to my charge that I have been paying attentions, as you call it, to Miss Martingale?"

"Everybody knows it," growled Starlingford.

"Then everybody knows something that is false. I am happy to set your mind at rest, sir. You have been misinformed."

"Now, that's not true. I mean, it's a deliberate falsehood," cried the duke, goaded to it by his opponent's coolness.

Lumley's brows contracted suddenly. He pressed a button on his desk.

"I don't know where the devil you learned your manners, sir," said he, "but it must have been a low sort of place. Martin, show his grace to the door, will you?"

The duke grew livid.

"You shall hear from my solicitors," he threatened.

The poet bowed, and sat down once more to his proof-sheets, while the duke—who never in his twenty years of life had been so insulted—suffered himself to be shown out.

But when he was gone, Lumley found work impossible. He thought over the duke's accusation, and weighed the absurdity of it. Then he thought of the beautiful Miss Martingale, and, somehow, after a little more thinking, Starlingford's charge appeared less absurd. He had seen her quite frequently lately—they were neighbors of his—and she being usually the brightest and smartest girl available, it was natural that he had singled her out on most of these occasions. Clearly, people had noticed it, and talked; proverbially, onlookers saw more of the game. Perhaps she had noticed it herself. He remembered that she had always been particularly pleasant to him.

Then an all-illuminating flash fell across his brain. Good Lord, how blind he had been! How blind to his own feelings, even! She was a charming creature, he swore, and from his present introspection he discovered that he had fallen in love with her without noticing it. It had taken this yokel-duke of hers to pluck the scales from his eyes, and he had actually told the duke an untruth. Well, the duke was clearly an ass, and if the duke intended to be jealous of him, he would see to it that the duke should not lack for cause. If he should end by cutting Starlingford out altogether—which then seemed to him an eminently probable solution of the problem—the duke had only himself to blame for it. She should find the laurels that would anon—in a figurative sense—encircle his poet's brow, more alluring than the strawberry leaves with which an accident of birth had crowned his grace of Starlingford.

Thus ran the poet's thoughts, and by such sophisms did conviction sink into his soul, inspiring a vista of the future which he should tread on rose-strewn paths beside the beautiful, the ravishing Helen Martingale—who had preferred to know a great love rather than to share a ducal coronet.

That he had frequently had such visions in which other women were to have been his companions did not at the time occur to him.

The poet and his guest, the lawyer, met at breakfast the next morning.

"Been in long?" inquired Lumley, as Tommy entered the room.

"Sweetest of youths, most gifted of poets, let me recommmend you a little gentle exercise as an antidote for the ugly matutinal penchant for sarcasm."

"And what," inquired the poet, selecting a kidney, "is your programme for to-day?"

"In the morning I am doing nothing. In the afternoon I am going to a garden party at the Loddingtons. In the evening I shall be at your disposal if you can tear yourself away from those withered 'Autumn Leaves' of yours."

"Will the Martingales be at the garden party?"

Hawksley looked up quickly. Had the poet got wind of his attachment to the divine Helen?

"I believe they will—I have heard so," he replied, cautiously.

"A fatal name, Helen," murmured the poet, rhapsodically.

"There was, I believe," said the lawyer, "a lady of that name in a place called Troy, a little while ago. She gave me no end of trouble, I know, because a gentleman of your profession wrote some verses about her. Rather a flirt, wasn't she?"

"I dare say. Most women are, when they are good-looking enough to be flirted with."

"You've found them so, have you? Hum ! Some more coffee?"

"I'm going with you to the Loddingtons," said the poet.

Hawksley grew uneasy.

"What about the 'Autumn Leaves'?"

"They'll keep."

“They’re certainly dry enough.”

He affected nonchalance, but in reality Hawksley was alarmed. He knew the poet’s susceptible heart, and the tornado-like manner in which it was his habit to sweep all before him when he set himself to play the game of dalliance—which was unconscionably often. The situation was trying enough already, with a duke in the background. With the poet on the spot, it must become positively unbearable.

So he set himself to dissuade his friend; he assured him that the affair would be an awfully slow one.

“I like ‘em slow.” said the poet, inscrutably, and he went.

Helen was there; very beautiful; very vivacious; very fascinating. The poet’s fall was consummated when his eyes alighted on her. He approached, and her reception of him proved to him what a blind fool he had been in the past. The brightening of her eye as it met his was a thing unmistakable. The beautiful Helen was conquered. He would sing of her as Homer never sang of that other ancient Helen.

The brightness of her mood infected him. It usually did infect such men as were capable of infection. He talked with a glib smartness that amazed himself. The little knot of men about her grew silent at his coming, and gradually melted away until only Hawksley was left to look on with a gloomy countenance, and make monosyllabic and unheeded efforts to obtain a share in the conversation. At last she dispatched him on some useless errand to her mother, and Lumley was alone with her. She asked him had he seen the boxwood alley. He answered her that he had not, and together they wandered toward it, vanishing from the sight of the other guests.

“You haven’t a flower, Mr. Lumley,” said she, presently.

“I never wear one.”

“But if I offer you one, I defy you to refuse it.”

“Give me the flower, but spare me the defiance. From your hands, dear lady, there is nothing that I could but receive upon my knees.”

She laughed, and broke a rosebud from a bush in passing. He observed the act, noted that the rose was red, and prepared a speech of dainty metaphor wherewith to receive it.

“There, sir.” And she held it out to him.

“Dear lady,” he began, theatrically, bending over her hand as he took the flower. Then the little gasp that broke from her lips made him look up. He met the eyes of the Duke of Starlingford, who was approaching them.

Lumley straightened himself, wondering what would be the most convenient pose, and determined upon the adoption of persiflage and effrontery. Starlingford raised his hat coldly to the lady.

“May I ask you, Nell—I mean will you allow me to have a word with this gentleman?” said he.

“Why, certainly not,” cried Nell, with a coolness that won her the poet’s profoundest admiration. “I am showing Mr. Lumley the grounds, and I am not going to relinquish him.”

“Which, though they be of small account,” put in the poet, gracefully, “are quite my own feelings in the matter.”

“Perhaps you, sir, will allow me to say a word to this lady?”

The poet’s eyes asked Nell a question.

“If you don’t mind waiting for me, I shall not keep you a moment,” said she, and withdrew.

“Now look here, Nell,” the duke threatened, “I mean, if you have anything more to say to that fellow, I shall never speak to you again. What I mean to say is, people are talking about you, and I won’t stand it. I came here to speak to you about it, and I hardly expected to—well—I mean—”

“Oh, yes, you always mean well,” she cried, impatiently, “But isn’t your coming here rather imprudent? Your mother, you know, might hear of it.”

What the duke said may be charitably described as discourteous.

“I shan’t speak to you again, Helen,” he wound up, “unless you do as I wish.”

“I shall be sorry, of course,” she answered coldly, “but you must please yourself.”

The duke was even more impolite in his utterance than before. Her cheeks grew scarlet.

“You forget yourself.” she cried. “And you forget that the fact of your having been born a duke does not relieve you from the ordinary

obligations of a gentleman." And with that parting sting she left him to rejoin the poet.

Now, as it happened, the Duchess of Starlingford did come to hear of her son's transgression, and he spent an uncomfortable half hour with her next day. This resulted in his leaving England on the morrow by her command and on pain of the cessation of the liberal allowance which she made him.

Curiously enough, Lumley crossed the channel on the same day, summoned suddenly to Cannes to the deathbed of one of his aunts. He left the lawyer to make his excuses and explain his sudden departure to a host of common friends. But to Helen he wrote, himself, a letter rather longer than the mere communication of his departure demanded, and containing dark hints of happenings when he should return.

But he returned not so speedily as he expected. His aunt recovered, and expressed the hope that he would stay on—she found him so useful. His cousin Marjory had grown up a remarkably good-looking young woman, he discovered, and so he stayed until the winter had set in.

Some friends of his aunt's who had stopped at Cannes on their way to Algiers in December, invited him to join them. The party contained a delightful creature fresh from a Paris convent school, untouched as yet by sophistication. The poet tore himself away from his cousin Marjory, and went.

He wintered in Algiers, and in England none but his solicitors knew of his whereabouts. In April he proposed to the lady who was to blame for this, and was refused. For two days he was very miserable, then suddenly—similia similibus curantur—he remembered Helen Martingale, and marveled that in the contemplation of a shallow schoolgirl he should have so long forgotten her.

Three days later he left for England. At Calais the first man he saw on the packet was the Duke of Starlingford. His grace treated him to a glare, and he the duke to a mild irrecognizing glance.

He put up at a hotel in town; looked in at his club, and permitted a man he knew to carry him off to a reception. There again one of the first men he met was his grace of Starlingford. It occurred to him that the duke must by now be of age, and he wondered whether his grace would

enter the lists with him again. He rather hoped he would; he would enjoy the contest.

The duke looked at him, and speculated upon the uses to which Lumley might have put his absence—ignorant also of the fact that Lumley had been out of England for the past ten months.

That very morning Starlingford had come across the year-old letter from Vavasour. “There is an outsider down here, a lawyer chap named Hawksley, who,” etc. The duke had smiled over Vavasour’s mistake in the name. “So like Vavvy,” he said to himself, “he always did mix up these bourgeois names horribly.”

He looked across at the poet now, and scowled. But the poet was smiling ecstatically. His gaze had just rested upon Helen Martingale’s face. She came toward him, smiling also. The poet was transported by the sweetness of that smile. What a fool he had been to have lingered abroad!

They shook hands effusively.

“Wherever have you been hiding all these months?” she cried. And the duke, within earshot, winced and wondered.

“Hiding from the sun,” murmured the poet.

“Sh!” she laughed. “Tommy will be jealous if he hears you.”

Just then Lumley caught sight of Hawksley’s rubicund visage—more rubicund even than when last he had seen it. The man of law grinned a welcome.

“Nellie has wonderful eyes,” he cried, “she spotted you the moment you entered the room.”

The poet was mystified. No less so was the duke in the background. Then a lady swept up to them.

“Ah, my dear Mrs. Hawksley, there you are,” she cried.

The poet felt a cold perspiration start on his brow, and glanced at Tommy with a smile that was positively sickly.

“Hawksley,” muttered the duke in the background. “Hawksley!”

Then realization swept down upon him like a flood.

“Well, I’m hanged,” said he.

As Lumley, in a very dejected frame of mind, was leaving the house, someone touched him on the shoulder. It was the Duke of Starlingford.

"I owe you an apology, Mr. Lumley, for not believing you last year at Stollbridge. I mean that in fact there was a mistake. I was told that a man named Hawksley was—well, I mean—was paying address to Miss Martingale. I somehow mixed up his name with yours, and well—I mean, I'm sorry."

"You mixed up his name with mine," echoed the poet. And his memory calling up his interview with the duke that day, he also realized even as the duke had done a few moments before. And even as the duke had muttered so did he now mutter:

"Well, I'm hanged," or words of very similar sound. Which shows that in moments of great emotion a duke and a poet may avail themselves of very similar phrases to express very similar feelings.

The Siege of Savigny

Chambers' Journal, November 1903

Heigh-ho! A man of twenty in love is a sad fool. Yet who would not be a sad fool that he might be twenty and in love?

I sat idling in the guard-room of the Castle of Nogent one July morning, my twenty-year-old mind running upon a lady who dwelt at Juvisy, whose very name was unknown to me, but whose eyes—the bluest that I ever looked into—had nathless made a fool of me. That pair of eyes had drawn me oft of late to ride across the league and a half that lay 'twixt Nogent and Juvisy, so that I might pass beneath her window, and earn for all reward perchance a glance, perchance not that. So, thinking of her, as had become my constant wont, sat I that July morning when one of M. de Crecqui's men came to bid me wait upon the Governor.

I was genially received by my kind patron with the intimation that a hazardous enterprise awaited me if I were minded to undertake it: the business being his own rather than the King's. The Château de Savigny, which lay some ten leagues distant from Nogent, and thirty leagues this side of Paris, and which was the property of M. de Crecqui, had been forcibly seized by his brother-in-law, M. de Monravel, upon the plea—inaccurate, my patron said—that the demesne formed part of his wife's marriage-portion.

M. de Crecqui had garrisoned the place pending the legal settlement of the business, confident in his influence with the King to bring it to the issue he desired; but the audacious Monravel, knowing

how weighty an argument at law is the possession of the disputed ground, had duped my patron's men, and seizing the château, had set a slender garrison of his own—six men, as I afterwards learnt—to hold it against M. de Crecqui. Monravel relied as much upon his influence with the Parliament to establish the justice of his pretensions as did Crecqui build upon his influence with our good King Henry the Fourth.

In such a pass stood matters now; and, piqued by the affront that had been put upon him, it was M. de Crecqui's desire that I should start forthwith for Savigny, taking half-a-dozen men-at-arms with me, and there by force or strategy oust Monravel's knaves, and at any cost regain possession of his castle, holding it as a place de guerre.

I liked the business much; yet I was not blind to the risk that I ran did the Parliament prove the place M. de Monravel's. But my patron promised me in all solemnity that he would sustain me against all risks, and himself answer to the King for all that I did as being done in his name and by his express commands.

Thus reassured, I picked my men, and with the six of them in back and breast plates and pots of burnished steel, I rode out for Savigny without more ado, and preserving the utmost secrecy as to our destination.

I went by way of Juvisy, and had for my reward a glimpse of my lady coming out of the Church of St. Jacques as we rode by. She was attended by an elderly waiting-woman, who came behind her at a respectful distance, and she walked with eyes demurely downcast and folded hands, as becomes a maiden fresh from her devotions; but the clatter my fellows made in passing caused her to lift her eyes. They met my impassioned gaze, and for a moment they were not withdrawn.

Mayhap the ardour of my glance it was, mayhap the brave figure I cut in my glinting corslet and plumed hat: I know not which of these, but this I know—that into her eyes, which hitherto had never bestowed upon me but an indifferent, almost contemptuous look, if they had looked at all, there seemed to leap a light of interest. Her lips—surely it was not my enamoured fancy—assumed the faintest of smiles; a smile of kindliness methought it. The blood rushed to my head, and so far drowned my usual timidity that, bending low upon the withers, I doffed

my hat in the courtliest fashion I was master of. Thus far did impulse bear me, but no farther. Draw rein I dared not, but passed on; and, growing presently conscious that my troopers' faces were all agrin, I swore softly to myself, and harshly bade them travel faster.

It is not my purpose to set down in detail how we took possession that very night of the Château de Savigny. The thing was accomplished with a simplicity rendered possible by the carelessness of the garrison and the unexpectedness of our attack. I turned all Monravel's creatures from the place, with the exception of an elderly dame who had charge of the kitchen, and whom we thought it convenient to keep with us. Four of our six troopers I sent back to Nogent, retaining but Barnave and Grégoire, for the place was of such strength that three men alert might hold it against an army.

Four days later an huissier sent from Paris by the Parliament presented himself at Savigny to demand of me that I should let down the drawbridge and deliver up the castle. I answered that I did not know him, and that I would obey nought but a written order from M. de Crecqui, who had entrusted his castle to my keeping. That black-coated rascal answered me with threats of the hangman; whereupon I bade Barnave open the postern beside the portcullis and throw a plank across the moat. This done, I invited the bailiff to enter. He came gingerly enough, for he was unaccustomed to such narrow bridges. Had he known what awaited him he had not come at all; for when he was midway across, the plank was suddenly tilted over, and he was flung headlong into the slimy water. With a rope we rescued him, and sent him, wet and sorrowful, back to Paris and his Parliament.

This outrage must have made a fine stir, for three days later Savigny was visited by no less a person than a councillor, who came with all the pomp of office and a guard of honour of six archers. He was prodigal in threats—so prodigal that, grown weary of them, I bade the plank to be thrust out to him; but, knowing what had befallen the bailiff, and deeming that I intended him a like affront, he grew purple with rage, and with a parting volley of threats, he rode off in high dudgeon. Had I been older it might have afforded me uneasiness to think that I had

derided the Parliament, flouted its commands, and insulted its ambassadors.

It was on the morning of the second day after the councillor's visit that Grégoire brought me word that a lady was at the gates demanding speech of the master of the place. Now, if that information caused me some slight astonishment, it was as nothing to my amazement when, upon looking out from the postern, I beheld the very lady that was mistress of my thoughts: the lady of Juvisy. The horse she rode was bathed in sweat, flecked with foam, and breathing hard.

'Are you the master of this castle, monsieur?' was her panted greeting.

' I am in command here, madam,' I answered timidly.

'Then, monsieur, of your courtesy, of your chivalry, I crave shelter. I am being pursued.'

'Pursued, madam?' I cried, touched already by the distress in her voice. 'By whom?'

'Oh, what does it signify?' she cried, glancing fearfully behind her. 'By M. de Bervaux, my guardian. For Heaven's sake, monsieur, protect me!'

What answer could I make any woman who thus appealed to me? What answer could I make to her of all women?

'Holáthere!' I shouted. 'Barnave! Grégoire! Quick, let down the portcullis.'

Breathing a prayer of gratitude to the god of lovers for this signal favour, I went hat in hand to assist her to alight in the courtyard, the while a very torrent of thanks rained down upon me from her lips in a voice so rich and musical that I listened as one enthralled; and when presently she paused abruptly, I looked up to find her eyes riveted upon my face, and her brows knit, as though she looked on something that was puzzling her.

'Surely, surely, monsieur,' she said at last, 'we have met before?'

I went red from chin to hair. 'Indeed—indeed, madam, I have seen you often,' I stammered.

'At Juvisy, was it not?'

'Yes, madam, at Juvisy.'

‘Ah!’ And with the utterance of that monosyllable, so kindly and so witching a smile lighted her face that I know not what folly I had wrought but that shouts sounded without at that moment.

Grégoire came up with the news that a party of mounted men stood before the castle.

‘Monsieur!’ cried the lady in high distress, ‘you will not give me up? Pity me, monsieur! I am a poor defenceless maid, and there are those without who would force me into a hateful marriage for the sake of what little wealth I am possessed of.’

‘Say no more, Mademoiselle.’

‘Ah! but, monsieur,’ she broke in tearfully, ‘you must tell them that I am not here. In your mother’s name, monsieur, I beg you, pity and help me!’

‘I swear they shall go hence without you,’ I answered firmly; whereupon she caught my hand and kissed it, blessing me for a brave and noble gentleman—my lips envying my hand the while.

At length I bade one of my knaves call Catharine, the woman that had been left behind by Monravel’s men, and to her care I consigned mademoiselle. That done, I approached the window and looked out. I beheld a very magnificent gentleman, bravely arrayed and well mounted, and with him two fellows whom at a glance I took to be serving-men.

‘Holá, my master!’ I shouted, ‘what seek you?’

‘I am in search of a lady,’ he replied, with princely hauteur.

‘Ohé! A lady? Has she fallen into the moat?’

‘You are pleased to jest, Master Jackanapes,’ quoth he with a scowl. ‘I am in search of the lady who has sought shelter in this castle.’

‘Jackanapes in your teeth, you dog!’ I answered. ‘Were I not’—

‘Answer me, sir,’ he thundered, interrupting me. ‘Are you harbouring a lady? I demand it.’

‘Oui-da! You demand it? Monsieur, I would have you know that my name is Armand de Pontis, and that.’—

‘I am answered,’ he broke in angrily, ‘And you shall smart for it, you knave. I am the lady’s legal guardian, and deliver her to me you shall.’

‘If you stay there another minute,’ I answered, losing all patience, ‘I’ll deliver you a handful of carbine-shot.’

‘I shall appeal to the Provost,’ he threatened.

‘Appeal to the devil, sir!’ I retorted; and, slamming the window, I left him to his own devices.

As I turned I found mademoiselle standing behind me, her eyes alight with excitement.

‘We have gained a respite, mademoiselle; but I fear that he will return, and the Provost with him.’

‘What then, monsieur?’ she cried in alarm. ‘You will not abandon me to them?’

‘Never, mademoiselle,’ I answered resolutely. ‘We shall fight this battle out together.’

To seal the bargain—and deeming that I had earned a right to this—I gallantly raised her hand to my lips.

‘And I warrant you we will prove good comrades,’ quoth she with an arch coyness that made me dizzy with hope.

Now, albeit M. de Bervaux was gone, he had left behind him his two servants on guard in the clearance before Savigny. It occurred to me to make a sortie and scatter them, and I mentioned this to Grégoire in mademoiselle’s presence.

‘Twere easily done,’ said he; ‘but it would avail us little unless’—His glance at mademoiselle completed the sentence.

‘Mademoiselle remains here,’ I answered, interpreting his glance.

That evening a letter reached me from M. de Crecqui.

He lauded in it my treatment of those whom the Parliament had sent to me, and urged me to stand firm and give way to no threats, since he would be answerable for all. He was on the point of setting out for Paris to lay the matter before His Majesty. He ended with some touching professions of friendship, and promises of future advancement did I continue in this matter to show myself as staunch and trustworthy as hitherto. That promise of his was a pretty thing to dwell upon, and with his letter for a foundation I built myself as glorious a ‘castle in Spain’ as ever sprang from the hopeful soul of an ambitious boy; and in that castle of fancy dwelt I and Henriette de Chandora—for such, she had told me,

was her name. I pictured myself a knight of romance, and her the lady I had rescued in her hour of need; and as the days sped by this pleasant fancy grew and absorbed my every thought.

M. de Bervaux returned that night with the Provost and twenty men-at-arms—half of whom appeared to have been enlisted from the peasantry of the neighbourhood; and I was now called upon to give up the lady I had kidnapped. 'Kidnapped' was the word the Provost used, and 'tis small wonder I was out of temper at it. I was discreet, however, and did no more than swear by my honour that I had kidnapped no lady. He persisted that I held her a prisoner in Savigny; and, since I would not grant him leave to enter and search the place, he despatched a messenger to Paris to inform the King and the Parliament of what was passing. That done, and with wild threats of using cannon against me, he encamped his men in the clearance before the castle, and sat down to besiege me.

Four days went by ere the Provost's messenger returned, and were I minded to set down in detail all that had passed in those four days 'twixt mademoiselle and me, the thousand things we said, the million thoughts I kept for later utterance, I should fill a volume as copious as the Bible.

On the night before the messenger's return we were walking on the ramparts—she wrapped in a man's cloak, and trusting to this and to the darkness to screen her from any prying eyes of our besiegers. I stalked along, talking as only a man of twenty will talk when the stars are overhead, the air is warm, and the woman of his heart doth bear him company. She listened and answered, and was kind, and so the thing came about; and before I quite knew what had chanced I was on my knees holding her hand in mine, offering her myself and all that I owned, and bewailing that my offering was so poor a thing—in which, in all truth, I did myself no more than justice. She said me neither yea nor nay, yet from her kindly tone and the touch of her sweet hand upon my head I gathered hope, and promised to wait, as she besought me, another day. She cried out that I bewildered her; that she must think at least until the morrow. And so we parted.

The morrow brought a more imperious summons from the Provost and M. de Bervaux. The Provost had word from the Parliament that I

and those with me were to be held outlaws and taken dead or alive unless I could prove that Mademoiselle de Chandora was not in the château. The news staggered me. What was M. de Crecqui about that such a decree as this was passed? And then I bethought me that this matter of mademoiselle was a thing apart from the mere holding of Savigny against M. de Monravel, and beyond the pale of M. de Crecqui's influence. The fear of disaster loomed suddenly before me.

'What proof will satisfy you, Master Provost?' I demanded.

'None but a search of the château,' he answered firmly.

'I have already told you, sir, that M. de Crecqui, my master, has forbidden me to open the gates to any one.'

'Have a care how you trifle, M. de Pontis,' he cried. 'I am empowered by the Parliament to proceed to extremities if you withstand me. M. de Crecqui's affairs are nought to me. Unless you admit me before sunset I'll send to Juvisy for cannon, and talk to you with them.'

Here was a pretty situation! And what would M. de Crecqui say if Savigny were demolished by cannon? I went over to the northern wing of the château, where mademoiselle had her apartments, and having found her, I told her what had passed.

'There is but one remedy,' said she, with a sigh.

'That is?'

'To hand me over to my guardian.'

'Were I minded to do so vile a thing, 'twould be too late; for if the Provost can prove that I have detained you I shall certainly be arrested.'

'Oh monsieur,' she cried, wringing her hands, 'is it for such a reward that you have befriended me? What can I do— what sacrifice can I make to save you from the consequences of your generosity?'

'So that you love me'—I began, when some one knocked. With an oath I strode to the door.

Barnave was there with a letter. It had been flung on to the ramparts with a stone attached to it from the eastern side, which was unguarded by our besiegers. Taking the package, I dismissed him, then eagerly tore it open. As I had already guessed, it was from M. de Crecqui, and dwelt at some length upon the charge which had ben preferred against me.

‘I more than half suspect,’ he wrote, that this is a trumped up lie of Monravel’s, a pretext to gain admittance to the château and to overcome you. But the accusation is a serious one, and you must admit the Provost and one or two men—not more—to make their search. Keep close watch over them whilst they are in the place, and see that, as they enter and depart, your gates are not rushed. If by any chance the story be true—which I canot bring myself to credit—and you have a woman in the castle, we are all undone. I shall of a certainty lose Savigny, and as for you—may God have mercy on your soul!’

My heart sank at the last words, and in silence I handed the letter to Henriette. She took it, read, and fell to pondering with knitted brows. At length she looked up.

‘If you were to get me secretly out of the château,’ she said slowly, ‘and then let the Provost make his search, would not the difficulty be overcome?’

‘Ay, ma mie,’ I answered, ‘it would indeed. But how is it to be accomplished? The château is besieged.’

‘On one side only,’ she returned quickly. ‘The eastern side is unguarded.’

‘There are no gates,’

‘But there are windows.’

‘The lowest is thirty feet above the moat.’

‘I might climb down a ladder.’

‘Into the moat?’ I asked. ‘Child, the wall sinks sheer into the water.’

The information baffled her for a moment. ‘I have it,’ she cried presently. ‘You have a rope-ladder in the château?’

I answered her that we had such rhings, and thereupon she suggested to me that after nightfall I should descend by it from the lowest window on the eastern side, and swim the moat, bearing the end of the ladder with me; then, having landed, I was to hold it taut, so that it sloped clear of the water. Down this she would descend; and, once she had reached the ground, it would be easy for me to re-enter the castle in the same manner I had left it.

‘But you, mademoiselle!’ I cried, ‘Where will you go?’

‘To the Carmelite convent at Bernault; it is a little more than half a league distant, and I know the way.’

I still protested that the descent would be fraught with peril; but she made light of my fears, and so the matter was settled, and the determination taken to carry out this plan of hers after midnight—in the hours when nature would have set the vigilance of our besiegers at its weakest.

It wanted a little to two o’clock in the morning when, having assured myself that all was quiet in the Provost’s camp, I made my way down to the courtyard by the light of a lanthorn. As I stepped into the quadrangle I came suddenly face to face with mademoiselle, who had been waiting for me by the door.

‘Where are your men?’ was the question wherewith she greeted me.

‘My men?’ i echoed. ‘Why, asleep upstairs’; and with a jerk of the thumb I pointed over my shoulder up the steps that I had just descended.

‘And the woman Catharine?’

‘Is asleep also, I imagine.’

There was a pause. Then, laying her hands upon my arm, and bringing her face so close to mine that I could feel her breath upon my cheek, she said in a whisper, ‘It had been better that you had brought Grégoire to guard that door. I am afraid of that woman. I mistrust her. She has been watching me all day, and I have begun to fear that she is spying upon me.’

‘Par Dieu!’ I gasped, ‘tis possible. She was a creature of Monravel’s.’

‘Hist! What was that?’ and her fingers tightened on my arm.

‘What?’

‘Behind you, on the stairs. Did you hear nothing?’

‘No,’ I answered. Then, smitten by a sudden thought, ‘Wait,’ I said, and, stepping back, I softly closed the heavy oaken door, and locked it.

‘Now,’ quoth I with a chuckle, ‘she may follow us, but not beyond that door. She may knock or shout, but none will hear; the door is too solid. Come, mademoiselle!’

I drew her across the courtyard and through the narrow doorway leading to the eastern wing. We hurried up the flight of steps and along the corridor to the window upon which we had fixed. Softly opening it, I peered out. Nothing stirred; and, although the faintest of crescent moons hung in the sky, the night was dark enough to please and befriend us. Swiftly uncoiling the ladder, I made the hooks fast to the sill; then, drawing off my doublet and my boots, I set myself without more ado to climb down towards the water.

I had gone half-way, and hung but some fifteen feet from the moat, when of a sudden something gave way above me. It seemed to me that the thin streak of moon swept suddenly across the sky; nay, the whole firmament had shifted, and where it had been I now beheld the earth, then the still, black waters of the moat as I splashed into them.

Dazed by my fall, and understanding naught of what had chanced, but still clutching the ladder, I rose to the surface and spat the fetid water from my mouth, thinking that, albeit I was not drowned, ‘twas odd I should be poisoned. Too bewildered than to act other than by instinct, I struck out for land. I stretched out my arms to catch at something that might help me from the water, when suddenly I felt it taken in a grasp and found assistance, as unwelcome as it was unlooked for; for as I was dragged out I realised with a shudder that the splash of my fall must have drawn the Provost’s people.

Lanthorns began to gleam, and men seemed to spring up around me as by enchantment. I stood up at last with a little knot of fellows surrounding me, and more than one mocking laugh smote my ear. Facing me I beheld M. de Bervaux, and by his side the Provost I had derided. Apprehensively I glance up at the window; but the darkness left me in doubt if mademoiselle were still there or not.

With a laugh, M. de Bervaux inquired what fancy it was had led me to bathe in the moat at such an hour; and I will not dwell upon the score of jests wherewith this was followed by these merry gentlemen. Sick at heart, dripping, and shivering with cold—in truth, very miserable—I was led round to their encampment.

From the dejected state I had been in before, I went beside myself with rage as, upon coming into the clearance that fronts the castle, I

beheld what was toward. The postern stood open, and up a plank that was stretched across the moat the Provost's men were filing into the château. How had this thing come to pass? Who had opened the postern? Nor Barnave nor Grégoire, nor yet Catharine, for I had locked them up in the northern wing of the building when I left it with mademoiselle. A light broke suddenly upon my mind, a light by which I saw things as they were; and in that hour I knew that I had been duped—the hooks of my ladder had not slipped from the sill by accident. I bethought me of M. de Crecqui, of his faith and trust in me, and a groan burst from my lips.

They took me a prisoner to Paris, and in my company went Barnave and Grégoire, whose glances I could not bear to meet. Them they set free; but me they flung into the Châtelet, and there I lay for a week, bitterly reviling myself and my fortunes, and yet more bitterly dubbing the fair sex the 'infamous sex,' with the gallows of Montfauçon looming sinister on my mind's horizon.

On the eighth day of my captivity my sour-faced jailer bade me arise and follow him, saying that Madame de Monravel was come to visit me. He ushered me into a room where I beheld the woman who had brought me to this sorry pass. Beside her stood he whom I had known as M. de Bervaux. From her first words I gathered not only that—as already I suspected—she was none other than Madame de Monravel herself, but also that the gentleman whom she had called her guardian was her guardian by right of wedlock.

I scowled fiercely upon the pair of them, whereupon she came forward with her sweet, scornful smile.

'Nay, not so glum, M. de Pontis,' she cried archly, 'I bring you news of your release and your free pardon for resisting the Parliament's authority. My brother, M. de Crecqui, has lost the Château de Savigny; but I think he recognises how desperate was his case, and I am sure that it will not be long ere he restores you to his favour. The Parliament would have made an example of you, M. de Pontis, but I insisted upon

your unconditional pardon. I owed you that, methinks,' she added slyly, 'for the sake—for the sake of Henriette.'

The Sacrifice

English Illustrated Magazine, February 1904

"Paul, you must go away; you must leave Marseilles," she wailed.

He turned from the window at which he had stood—a fine figure, straight and lithe as a rapier, and a fine face which dissipation had made white and haggard. His sable hair was tied into a slovenly queue, and escaping streaks of it were matted about his forehead. His dress, though slovenly as well, showed yet signs of a modishness which it was dangerous for a patriot to affect, lest the ever-ready breath of suspicion should whisper the fatal charge—aristocrat. He laughed a laugh that was half a sneer.

"You forget, Citoyenne, that I am not in Marseilles for my amusement, but upon the business of the French Republic—One and Indivisible. You forget that I am become a priest of the gospel of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, or Death."

"Do you mock me, Paul?"

"Mock you? Oh no, Citoyenne, I mock myself. I am reminded to-day that it was for you that I became all this; whilst you"—he paused, his lip curling contemptuously—"you have married. Oh, no, Citoyenne, I do not mock you. I admire your well-balanced mind that led you to make so wise a choice, and link your fate with that of a man so powerful as the Prefect, your husband." He spat the last word from his mouth like a foul thing.

"Paul, you are cruel. You do not know what you say. Ah, Dieu! I have been a coward, but no worse. After you left Boisvieux, I was suspected of being in correspondence with emigrés. There was no

foundation for the suspicion, but of what account is evidence in these times? I was thrown into prison. The guillotine was ever hungry, and victims were everywhere being sought for it. I was doomed, and I was afraid to die. And then, in my extremity, Duroc saw me in prison.

"He returned again and again; he spoke to me, and in the end he offered to save me if I would marry him. As I live, as Heaven is my witness, Paul, his offer was loathsome, and I thought of you. But I thought also of death. Ah, do not sneer, Paul! Had you been there, or had I had news of you to strengthen me, I think I could have withstood him. But it was six months since I had heard from you, and—and I was afraid to die."

She paused and sat rigid, her frail hands clasped and gripped between her knees, her grey eyes looking up to him out of her pale delicate face, in an agony of appeal.

Meeting her gaze he smiled. Then his face took on a grim expression.

"This is true, Berthe?"

"It is true, Paul."

He approached, and set a strong nervous hand upon her brown head; she started under his touch, and drew away.

"Berthe," said he, quietly, "few know the power that is mine. Before long my name shall ring through France as that of one of the great ones of the Republic. Few know the business that brings me South. Your husband certainly does not. In Paris a battle of giants is being fought, and Robespierre, who is my friend, and on whose business I am here, shall triumph. My mission to Marseilles, Berthe, is of such a character and invests me with such power, that at a word from me this husband of yours shall vanish as the snow vanishes beneath the sun. I have no need to even lie away his life.

"I need but say that I have learnt that he uses the power intrusted him to advance his own interests, to serve his own vile ends. He has done this in your own case, as you have told me. For this, within a little week, the Citoyen Prefect, Cassius Duroc, shall mount the steps of the patriotic guillotine. And then, Berthe—," he cried, opening wide his

arms, and smiling down upon her. But she drew away from him with a cry of horror.

"No, no!"

He stood still. His arms fell heavily to his sides, and his face grew hard.

"I understand. You have lied to me. This story of the fear of death was a fabrication to—"

"It was true, Paul. I swear it as Heaven is my witness."

"Heaven!" he sneered. "There is no Heaven. The Republic has abolished it—just as it has abolished truth and honesty."

"Paul," she pleaded, stretching out her hands, "have pity!"

"Pity!" he echoed fiercely, and as he spoke he caught her wrists in a grip that made her wince with pain. "Pity on whom? On you or on him? Speak, you little fool. Answer me. Let me know something of what is in your heart. On whom shall I have pity?"

"On me and him. Leave Marseilles. Forget me, Paul. I am only a poor, cowardly thing."

He flung her hands from him, and turning, he crossed again to the window.

"What need to fool me? Why could you not in honesty have said that you had changed your fickle mind? that this provincial Prefect, this kennel-bred canaille, pleased you better than the unfortunate Paul de Lavoisie? Is it ever a woman's way to act a part—to live a lie?"

"I have done neither; I have told you the truth," she insisted.

He swung round again, his black eyes afire.

"But you love this man?"

"I have a child," she murmured, "and it is my duty to my little son to preserve his father."

He made a sudden gesture of anger or of loathing. Then checking himself, he crossed to the table and took up his cocked hat on which the Convention's Tricolor was ostentatiously displayed.

"Citoyenne," said he, deliberately and coldly, "I shall leave Marseilles within a week. While I am here, I shall not again intrude myself upon you. Will you give yourself the trouble of telling the Citoyen-Prefect Duroc that I regret not to have found him here, but that I

shall expect to see him without delay at my lodging—32, Rue de Larive? Say the Deputy Lavoisie on pressing business of the Republic. Adieu, Citoyenne."

He made her a bow of the old salons, where first they had met, and setting his hat upon his black, ill-kempt head, he passed out and down the stairs into the sunlit street.

In a marvelling silence she watched his departure. Once her face grew almost eager, and she half rose to call him back. But ere she could obey the impulse the light had faded again from her grey eyes, and sinking into her chair she sat and thought, and presently she wept.

Later she dried her tears, and her mood was one of resentment. What right, she asked herself, had this man to come to her out of the past? She had thought him dead: indeed, for the past two years she had already ceased to think of him, and now of a sudden he was returned to sow unrest and fear in her soul. He was returned invested with an awful power, and her knowledge of his bold, unyielding character gave rise to the fear that he would over-ride all obstacles that lay betwixt them, recking nothing of the cost. Her husband, the father of her child, was doomed if this man had his way. Had he not shown her how a word from him could destroy Duroc?

It was true that she did not love her husband, but Habit often sits so closely in the place that should be Love's that the one may be confounded with the other. So was it now with her. She remembered only that Duroc was the father of her boy. She confessed to herself that perhaps she did not love him, but neither did she any longer love Lavoisie. Had he come to her hunted and proscribed, pity might have re-ignited the old flame. But he came powerful; commanding where he should have pleaded; harsh where he should have been tender; scornful where he should have been compassionate.

Since he had left her side it seemed to her that she had grown to hate him, for as fine and as easy to overstep is the line between love and hate as that which divides the lofty from the grotesque. And so out of her sorrow had anger grown, and out of anger hatred, bringing with it hatred's desire for the destruction of the hated. As she sat and thought her resolve grew strong and assumed a definite shape. Ere Lavoisie

could be given time to strike her husband he must himself be laid low. In Paris he might be powerful, the beloved of the sans-culottes, the friend and confidant of Robespierre, the very arbiter of the Republic. But here in Marseilles was not her husband equally powerful, given that, forewarned, he should have the advantage of the first blow? Would not a word from him arouse the rabble—that greatest power in terror-ridden France—His Majesty King Mob.

She had known Paul in the old days for an aristocrat; his name had then been de Lavoisie. Would it not suffice that she should tell her husband this? Her zeal for the Republic would please him. His own zeal and his vulgar sycophancy to the majesty of the People would do the rest. He would visit Lavoisie with the rabble at his heels. There would be no tribunal, no chance for the young deputy to present his papers, the tone of which might intimidate the public prosecutor and make him pause to communicate first with the great ones in Paris. No; he would be pointed out to the mob as an aristocrat; his name and title—the Chevalier Paul de Lavoisie—should be their warrant; he would be lanterné upon the spot, and thus should her fears be laid to rest.

Had she but had for one brief moment the gift of Asmodeus—had she been able, through walls and roofs, to take one glimpse of her poor lover—perhaps she had been less pitiless in her fell determination.

In the mean lodging he had hired in the Rue de Larive sat the Deputy Lavoisie, his chin in his palms, and his eyes upon a bundle of letters spread before him on the table, whilst his soul was writhing under the pain of the old wound whose cicatrice had been so rudely re-opened. The letters were letters she had written him long ago, and which he carried ever with him, treasuring them as the faithful treasure the relics of their patron saints. Again he read pages here and there, fervid with the instinctive poetry that is youth's when it loves. They mostly began "Mon bien aimé"; they mostly ended "Whilst I live I am thine—Berthe." They were mostly undated—for what does love reck of time or days?

"Whilst I live I am thine," he read aloud. Then with a hard, sudden laugh he rose, gathered the papers together and tied them into a bundle, which he contemptuously flung into the valise lying open on the floor.

Thereafter he set himself to pace the chamber, awaiting the Prefect's visit. By not so much as one hair's breadth had he swerved from his determination to depart as soon as he should have concluded the Convention's business at Marseilles, never again to cross the path of Berthe Duroc or her husband, and well might she have spared herself the playing of the treacherous rôle she was resolved upon.

The evening faded into dusk. Mechanically Paul lighted the candles on his table, and sat down to prepare his report for the Incorruptible.

At last steps sounded on the stairs, and a knock fell upon his door. He went to admit a short, bulky man with a red, coarse face and straggling greasy beard and hair of black, wearing a sword and a dirty Tricolour sash. He was followed by two soldiers of the National Guard. Marvelling at this military escort, Paul eyed the man with pardonable curiosity and justifiable disgust.

"You are the Citoyen-Prefect Duroc?" he inquired.

"I am that humble servant of the Nation," answered the newcomer grimly.

"I have been expecting you these two hours. Will you be seated?"

Paul closed the door, observing that the soldiers ranged themselves on either side of it, as though to guard the threshold.

The Prefect advanced slowly towards the table, his lips pursed and his shaggy head bent forward. He had not taken the line of action his wife had suggested. She had dared tell him nothing of what she knew of this man's present connection with Robespierre. She had not foreseen that to Duroc it should appear more profitable to arrest and arraign Lavoisie, and thus cover himself with glory, not only in the eyes of the people of Marseilles, but also of the Executive in Paris for his shrewdness and diligence in discovering and apprehending a suspicious devant. In this spirit had he come, leaving Berthe in an agony of apprehension.

He turned now, and bent a bloodshot eye on the young deputy.

"So you expected me?" he leered. "You had cause to, in all truth. I am glad not to disappoint you."

"You take a strange tone, Citoyen-Prefect. Do you know who I am?"

"Perfectly," answered the other, with grim facetiousness. "You are the ci-devant Chevalier Paul de Lavoisie, and I arrest you as an aristocrat, an enemy of the Convention, and a danger to the public safety." He made a sign, and the soldiers to place themselves on either side of Paul advanced before he could recover from his astonishment. "We have eyes in Marseilles, my aristocrat," said Duroc, with an unpleasant laugh.

"You have fools, too, it seems," returned the deputy with an answering laugh no less unpleasant. "The Republic, my friend, has a way of curing folly by depriving fools of the cause of it—their heads."

The confidence of Paul's tones gave the Prefect pause. "Is that all you have to advance in your defence?"

The temptation to allow this man to execute his egregious blunder and carry him before the tribunal of Marseilles proved irresistible to Paul. In his pocket was Robespierre's passe-partout, the sight of which should make the public prosecutor very humble, and cause Duroc anon to pay very dearly for his mistaken zeal.

"Neither is this a time, nor are you a man to whom I have any defence to offer. Even at the proper season I shall have no defence to advance—merely a fact."

"You brazen it after the manner of your kind," sneered Duroc. He shrugged his broad shoulders and took up one of the candles. "Meanwhile, my friend, we will look through your effects."

What is there swifter than thought? In a second of time Paul had remembered Berthe's letters; he had remembered that they were undated; he had in that second considered the brutality of this man's appearance, the possible—the certain—brutality of his ways; in that second he had had a vision of the future—Berthe's future—with this loathsome creature informed of the contents of those letters, ignorant of when they were written, ill-treating—possibly going the length of killing—her in his jealous brutality. At all costs—even at the sacrifice of the pleasure of working this ruffian's discomfiture before the tribunal—he must declare himself and prevent the search being made.

"Wait!" In a shout that was like the crack of a pistol, he delivered the imperative word.

Duroc turned, candle in hand, and raised his eyebrows. The note of sudden alarm in the voice hitherto so calm had not gone unperceived.

"It seems I have touched you, eh?"

"Fool!" thundered the deputy. "I was the Chevalier Paul de Lavoisie; but I have marched with the times. To-day I am the Citoyen-Deputy Paul Lavoisie, a member of the Executive, and here on the Convention's business, as this warrant of Maximilien Robespierre shows."

He stepped forward now and thrust his warrant under the Prefect's nose. The soldiers, hesitating in view of this announcement, hung back. Duroc saw the warrant, and his countenance fell. Then suddenly remembering again the unmistakable alarm with which Lavoisie had arrested him in his intention to search, and coupling it with this disclosure following upon the declaration that this was neither the time nor Duroc the person to whom he had any defence to offer, the Prefect's suspicions awoke again.

"It seems in order," said he, guardedly, and had you shown it me when first I entered, all would have been well. But you appear to conceal something, Citoyen, and I shall not bow to that document until I have made my search."

"But do you not understand that a man in my position has papers which are not for the eyes of everybody. I warn you that in tampering with State secrets you risk your head."

The Prefect grinned for answer.

"You talk like a follower of Capet. The Republic, my friend, has no secrets she cannot make known to her officers and to the nation. You forget that the Republic is the people. I shall make my search."

"At your peril."

"Pah!"

Turning, the prefect came upon the valise. He stooped, and when he rose again Lavoisie was at his side.

"What are these?"

“Private papers of my own,” answered Paul, whose cheeks were very white.

“Let us look at them.”

Duroc turned again to the table, and set down the candlestick. For an instant he put down the packet to unfasten it. In that instant Paul had pounced upon it, and suddenly drawing a pistol from his breast, he presented it at Duroc’s head.

“If you or either of your men moves an inch, I’ll shoot you,” said he, with a calm smile on his pale face.

Duroc blenched.

“You fool, this will cost you your life,” he muttered.

But Paul answered nothing. With his right hand holding the pistol to the head of Duroc, he was weighing in his left the bundle of letters, just as in his mind he was weighing the step he was about to take. If he gave those letters up to Duroc he had nothing to fear for himself; if he did not, everything. But on the other hand was Berthe. He settled the matter in his mind, and, that done, he held the letters over the flame of the candle.

“Bethink you,” cried Duroc, “that by burning those papers you are acknowledging their treasonable nature in the presence of three witnesses, and you are destroying yourself.”

“I know it,” answered Paul coldly. The letters were curling up and beginning to crackle with the heat.

“Do not delude yourself that your warrant from Robespierre can save you from the consequences of such an act. Robespierre himself, were he to come hither in person, could not save you from the guillotine.”

“I know it,” answered Paul again. “I have thought of all that.”

The package burst suddenly into flame. The blaze crept up and licked his hand; but like a modern Mutius he shrank not, nor did he relinquish his hold until the flames were dead, and naught but a little heap of black ashes was left to flutter from his scorched and blistered hand. Then, with a ghastly laugh, he stepped back, and flung his pistol on the table.

“Do your will, Citoyen. I am your prisoner.”

And thus did Paul Lavoisie, who had entered that house one of the most powerful personages of the Revolution, pass out a doomed man. He had for consolation the fact that he was sacrificing his life for the sake of the woman he loved; he did it without regret, with, in fact, a glow of exultation in his soul. But even of this was he to be robbed.

"Citoyen-Prefect," said he, struck by a sudden thought, "how came you to learn that I was the ci-devant Chevalier de Lavoisie?"

"From my wife, Citoyen," said Duroc, who saw no reason for concealing the fact. "She is from Boisvieux, and she recognised you when you presented yourself at my house to-day."

One of those all-illuminating flashes of revelation that at times we are accorded—and which often it were better we were not—came then to Lavoisie. He reeled suddenly forward, his hand going up to his head.

"Mon Dieu!" he gasped.

"What is the matter?" inquired Duroc.

"Nothing, Citoyen. A sudden faintness; the pain in my hand," he faltered. "Give me your arm, Citoyen Soldier."

The Locket

London Magazine, March 1904

"Shall we cut again?" enquired M. de Noailles, with a smile of polite insouciance.

For over an hour already the game had resolved itself into a duel 'twixt him and me. One by one the others had dropped out to become—some amused and some interested—spectators at the pitiable plucking of a fool. That fool was I. As the hour advanced, Noailles' lips had closed tighter in their sinister determination. For once that he lost, thrice would he win, and thus the gods of chance made cat and mouse of us, allotting to me the meaner role. Once, when in a frenzy I had doubled the stakes and won the cut, young Labresque, who was a cadet in my regiment, set a restraining hand upon my sleeve.

"Come, M. de Lescure," he murmured, "let that suffice you; see, the day is breaking."

The others scowled at him who to-day I know was my only friend about that board.

"For shame!" cried one. "Would you have him pause even as fortune smiles? Let him regain his losses, boy. Come, Lescure, it is the turn of the tide."

The argument sorted well with my inclinations. Again I doubled; again I cut; but this time—alas!—I lost. Noailles gathered in my gold.

"Again?" he enquired with a smile.

My breath came fast, and the fever of the game drew sweat to my brow, for all that the room was chill with the air of that September morn.

"I have," said I hoarsely, "a little land by Beaugency. If you are interested—?"

I paused. His face took on an expression of concern.

"A thousand regrets that it should have gone so far, Lescure—"

"Pish," I broke in irritably, "it is not that. I have no use for that plot of ground."

Noailles shuffled the cards.

"At your own price," said he, setting down the pack.

"Five thousand livres?" I asked impatiently. He inclined his head and cut a seven. A deadly stillness followed. The smile faded from Noailles' lips. Those about craned their necks to see my cut. With hope I put forth my hand. In despair I let the cards flutter from it. I had turned a six.

"Peste!" he deprecated, raising his eyebrows, "fortune scowls on you! But what will you? Lucky at love, mon ami—you know the adage."

The onlookers grinned. Our rivalry—which, however, we had not allowed to interfere with our relations—was well known, as was the greater favour wherein I stood with Mademoiselle de Trécillac. There was a sneer in his words that angered me. That night at play he had all but ruined me, and 'twas like to go hard with my suit in consequence.

Hotly—and without warrant—I made answer that the love wherein he held me lucky was the only thing he might not strip me of. A frown darkened for a moment his smooth, almost boyish, face, then it passed, and with a smile and a sigh—

"Helas, I wish I might, Lescure," said he, "I wish I might. But we waste time. Shall we cut again?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"For to-night, at least, Noailles, we cut no more. You shall have my note of hand for the Beaugency property."

"Have you lost heart?" he cried.

"No; but I have lost everything negotiable."

His fingers drummed absently on the table; his brown eyes met mine; his manner was a strange mixture of eagerness and hesitation.

"May I still suggest a stake?" said he. "I fear I am taking a great liberty, but it is prompted to me by something that has been said. You wear a locket set in diamonds, Lescure."

My face grew hot with anger. "Would you have me risk such a possession?" I cried.

"But why not?" quoth he suavely, "'Lucky at love' you said. Let it be the symbol of your love. Have you no faith in symbols? Do you not think that the love you boast is yours will stand your friend?"

To me just then, a prey to all a gamester's superstitions, the argument seemed specious. Indeed, methought, since he was powerless to win from me the love of Madeline, so, too, would he prove powerless to win from me the symbol of that love—the locket she had given me. Dolt that I was! Fool that I was! I caught at that fancy. I bethought me of my heavy losses, of my father's anger when he should hear of it—as hear he must—and of my compulsory withdrawal from Paris and my regiment.

I bethought me of how my straitened circumstances must perforce hamper my wooing of Madeline, and the inevitable postponement—or worse—of the marriage I so ardently hoped for. All this I saw, and how by one cut of the cards the whole might be righted. 'Twas as much for love of her as for any other reason, I told myself, that I consented.

"What do you stake against it?" I asked hoarsely.

"All that I have won to-night," said he, his face alight with eagerness.

"I'll take that wager, Noailles," I shouted, rising to my feet.

He rose also, and, bowing for answer, he took the pack and cut a five. With a sigh he replaced the cards, and pushed the pack towards me.

"You were well advised, it seems. Your symbol has indeed stood your friend. But cut—for form's sake."

Already tasting victory, I put out my hand and lifted half the pack. Noailles was the first to see the card, and a cry of satisfaction escaped him, despite his wonted courtly coolness. I had turned a deuce. In fascinated horror I gazed upon the card, then my fingers relaxed their hold and the paste-boards fluttered from my grasp, and striking in their

fall the table's legs, were strewn upon the ground around me. Trembling, I sank back into my seat.

"The gods are very good to me to-night, Lescure," he murmured deprecatingly. "Another time you shall have your revanche."

With fingers that seemed numb, I drew the locket from my breast. Passionately I snapped the slender chain that held it. For a moment I gazed upon the sweet face that smiled at me from its glittering setting of diamonds, and in that moment the devil prompted trickery to me. My cheeks burned as I conceived the thought, acting upon which I set myself to open the locket.

"What is it you do?" inquired Noailles.

"Eh?" I returned, with an affected unconcern that was pitiably transparent. "I am removing the picture."

"What?" he exclaimed. And as I looked up I met his glance black with anger.

"We said the locket, did we not, Noailles!" I asked. "There was no mention of the portrait."

On every face about me sat a smile, here grim, there scornful, there again pitying.

"Ho, ho! my dear Lescure," laughed he unpleasantly. "But you could not have misunderstood me. Is it likely I should have staked against those diamonds four times their value in moneys and in land? Or again, when we played for your Beaugency property there was no mention of the trees and tenements that stand upon it, yet such there is no question I have won. And so, too, have I won the locket and its portrait."

I made a vain, a pitiful, a shameful attempt to bluster it.

"Nay, but this is trickery," I shouted.

"Trickery!" he echoed in a tone that was the forerunner of a challenge.

"Aye, trickery," I repeated furiously. "What comparison can lie 'twixt the trees and tenements of the Beaugency estates and the portrait in this locket? Thoes trees and dwellings are an inseparable part of the property; they are immovables, and therefore included in the wager. But

not so this picture; it is no more a part of the locket than your clothes, Monsieur, are a part of your person."

He was white by now. yet he held the reigns of his anger with an iron hand.

"Monsieur de Lescure," said he in a voice that was forcedly calm. "I will put the matter to these gentlemen, and it shall be as they decide."

At that I protested that there was naught to be decided; that the matter was clear. Again I spoke of trickery, and artfully I went to work to pick a quarrel with him. My moneys and my lands I had lost, if not without a pang, at least without a murmur. But ere I parted with this portrait I was mad enough, blind enough, to court a quarrel which—to my shame I write it—must have involved the rending of my honour. But those present intervened, and to such purpose that presently with feelings of shame and rage such as a detected and baffled cheat may experience, I was forced to relinquish the portrait of Madeline which in that evil hour I had staked and lost.

With the portrait it seemed to me then that I had also lost the original; that in my last glance at her beloved face I had made my adieux to Madeline herself.

The use to which Noailles meant to put the locket I could not doubt. He would carry it to the lady; tell her how he had come by it, and thus prove overwhelmingly to my undoing how unworthy was I of its possession. With an aching heart I sat back in my chair, a prey to remorse and grief, and not a little shame at the unworthy trick by which I had sought to cheat him of the picture. I heeded not their cold farewells as they trooped out to leave me alone in my chamber with my sorrow and the dawn.

There sat I, my chin on my ruffles, amid the disorder that told of that night's play, for some three hours or more. I sat in a strange, waking sleep; my mind active in its poignant grief, my limbs benumbed and powerless.

From that stupor I was at last aroused by my servant, Duboscq, with a letter which had just been brought by a messenger from M. de Sartines.

"Ciel!" I cried, springing up, "what o'clock is it?"

"It has just gone nine, monsieur."

The note proved to be a brief, peremptory summons to the presence of the Lieutenant-General of Police. With the bitter reflection that unless my father should prove singularly lenient, forgiving and generous, I should soon cease to be troubled with such commands, I went to change my wig and my apparel, and remove, as far as possible, the traces of the night's sleeplessness from my countenance.

By ten o'clock I stood before M. de Sartines. His impassive, owl-like face, with its wide-set, observant eyes and beaky nose, gave no sign of the impatience with which he had awaited my coming, and which his words betrayed.

"I have been waiting for you, M. de Lescure."

I made my excuses, ill at ease beneath his inscrutable stare.

"You are looking pale, Lieutenant," he said. "I propose to send you for a ride into the country that will restore the colour to your cheeks. I am informed," he continued, "that M. de Noailles left Paris by the barrière d'Enfer two hours ago."

I started, whereat the faintest of smiles parted his thin lips.

"A curious coincidence, is it not, that the matter in which I require your services should concern him? M. de Noailles has mixed himself in affairs that he had been well advised to have avoided. His arrest in Paris was fraught with the risk of publicity, and his uncle, the Duke of St. Simon, might have given us trouble. Well, he has left Paris, and now is our opportunity. Two hours ago I requested His Majesty's permission to employ the most intelligent and discreet officer in his Guards on a business of the greatest delicacy."

I bowed amazed, and hopeful already that herein I might find a way to mend the night's disaster.

"My choice, M. de Lescure, fell upon you; not only because I know you to be possessed of these qualities, but also because I think that in this matter you may have interests of your own to serve, which will increase your diligence."

Amazing indeed were the powers that this man wielded by virtue of his network of espionage.

"M. de Noailles," he pursued," took the road to Orleans. Have you an idea whither he has gone?"

The chateau de Trécillac was situated in Berri some fifteen miles south of La Chatre. That that was his destination I did not for a moment doubt.

"I think I know, monsieur," I replied.

"Good. You will take six men and you will straightway set out to follow and overtake him. Here, M. de Lescure, is a letter of cachet commanding the Governor of the Bastille to receive and hold at His Majesty's pleasure the person of Stanislas de Noailles. But—" he paused significantly. "I do not wish—His Majesty does not wish—M. de Noailles to be brought to Paris."

I was bewildered.

"We should much prefer that you induce him to pursue his journey south as far as Spain, and that in awe of the imprisonment awaiting him he shall keep out of France for a year or two."

"You mean that I am to allow him to escape!"

"No doubt,"—and Sartines smiled—"you will find a way, armed with this." And he placed the letter of cachet in my hand. "But should you fail, should Noailles be deaf to all inducements, and refuse to quit France, then bring him here as quietly as may be. In a word, we wish him to disappear. We desire his removal, but do not wish to be called to account for it to St. Simon and his noisy supporters. You understand?"

I left M. de Sartines' presence with an elation as great as had been the despondency in which I had answered his summons. I saw a clear way to execute my commission in accordance with the King's desires and simultaneously serve my own interests.

Speed was of the first importance, and I so well contrived that within an hour of my interview with the Lieutenant-General I was riding down the Rue d'Enfer at the head of a troop of six well-mounted mousquetaires, and so on to the Orleans road. Neither ourselves nor our horses did we spare, and with the magic words of "In the King's name," we levied frequent relays along the road. An hour after nightfall we reached Artenay, where our exhausted condition compelled a halt for the night. Confident that we should overtake Noailles on the morrow, I slept

tranquil, and cradled by hope. But at Orleans, where we stopped next day, I learnt at the Hotel de l'Epée that a gentleman answering the description of Noailles had arrived there the evening before on horseback, but that hiring a berline he had pushed on, clearly intending to travel all night. The news dismayed me. If Noailles pursued this method of travelling by day in the saddle, and yet again by night resting in a coach, my chance of coming up with him ere he reached Trécillac was indeed slender.

Scarce giving my men pause, I ordered them back to their saddles, and not until we rode into La Motte Beuvron, on horses dropping with exhaustion, did I allow them to draw reign again. That night we lay at Vierzon, and when on the morning of the third day I roused my mousquetaires ar six o'clock, I was greeted with more than one murmur. But deaf to complaints I urged them on. Myself I seemed in my impatience impervious to fatigue. A fever at once consumed and sustained me. We dined at Chateauroux, and crossing the Cher pushed on towards La Chatre. In Berri at last, our journey's end was in sight. But with every hour of it my anxiety increased. Of de Noailles I could gain no news on the road, save at Chateauroux where the host of the "Pâon" had told me that a gentleman such as I described had arrived there in a berline the morning before. At that my heart sank. If he was a day in front of us now that the goal of our journey was so near I might abandon all hope of coming up with him this side of Trécillac, and although I might arrive in time to execute the royal commission, I should be overlate to serve my own purpose.

But when towards sunset we rode, a sorely jaded company, into the yard of the Hotel de Berri, at La Chatre, my heart suddenly leapt within me, for there, talking to the ostler, stood Stanislas de Noailles himself. Here within fifteen miles of Trécillac I had run my quarry at last to earth.

He started upon catching sight of me and turning a white, weary face upon me, he smiled bitterly, I thought.

"You here, Lescure?" said he. Then his smile broadened and he laughed outright.

"Why yes, I might have guessed you would come after me."

"Your guess proves right; not so the grounds on which you base it," I answered stiffly. "I am come on the King's business."

At that his face grew a shade paler—the consciousness of the work he had been at in Paris knocked at his heart, no doubt, and he must realise how thus, in the eleventh hour, his visit to Mademoiselle de Trécillac was to be frustrated. I could almost pity him for the bitterness of the disappointment that must be his.

"May I have a word with you in private, Monsieur?" I asked.

"But certainly," said he, and we went within. In a room of the upper floor of the hotel I produced the letter of cachet that was my warrant. The first shock over, no bearing could have been more admirable than was his.

"Who plays stakes, and who loses, pays," said he airily. "It seems I have lost, Lescure. But, voyons, I have friends in Paris; my uncle St. Simon—"

"Will know nothing of your arrest," I broke in. "You shall disappear utterly and completely."

He looked up sharply at that; then with a sigh and a laugh—

"You will sup with me, Lescure?" said he.

I answered that I would, adding that henceforth, until the Bastille entombed him, waking or sleeping, journeying or resting, he should find me ever at his side. His self-possession angered me with the anger of envy.

When we had supped he called for cards. Nothing could have sorted better with my wishes; it was the cue for which I had waited. I seized on it to ask him what he had left me that I might stake; to revile him for having already wrought my ruin; to protest that, thanks to the condition to which he had reduced me, I should be compelled to quit the King's service, and withdraw into the country.

Encouraged—as I intended that he should be—by that tirade of mine, he made the next move by suggesting a bribe.

"What if I were to make restitution?" he enquired with a kindly tone of concern that robbed the question of all its coarseness. "What then, Lescure? Would you do aught for me?"

“Do? Do what?” I asked in feigned perplexity.

“To regain the position which you have lost, would you”—he sank his voice almost to a whisper—”would you allow me to go free? I could be out of France in three days.”

“Nom de Dieu!” I cried, springing up. “Is this an offer to make a gentleman?”

A shade of disappointment crossed his face.

“I feared that you would answer thus,” said he. “And yet, believe me, you are foolish. It would but mean exchanging a disgrace that is inevitable and will soon be public, for a disgrace that none need learn of. Men do such things. Think, Lescure, there is your Beaugency property. and the matter of ten thousand livres that I won from you.”

“Do not tempt me.” I cried.

“As you will,” said he, tapping his snuff box. My heart bleeds for your father. The disgrace of it will kill him.”

“Better a disgrace that is but financial than a tarnished honour.”

“It will break your mother’s heart,” he sighed.

“Silence!” I thundered.

“And have you no thought for Mademoiselle de Trécillac?”

“Mon Dieu!” I cried out like one in despair, and paused, only to add as though in pursuance of my thoughts—”But no, no, it is impossible. Besides, my men have seen you.”

“But they do not know me,” he cried eagerly, leaning forward. “You were wise enough not to utter my name. They may think me some chance acquaintance. To-morrow you can rouse them and pursue your quest for M. de Noailles, whom you will not find.”

“And return to the King and M. de Sartines with a lie. Monsieur, I will hear no more.”

Nor did I, but for that night I thought that we had done well enough. Both into my hands and into the hands of the King was Noailles unconsciously playing.

On the morrow, as we broke our fast, I broached the subject anew myself.

“I have given thought to your last night’s words, Noailles,” I muttered. “Indeed, they kept me awake for hours. Temptation is a tough foe to fight.”

There was astonishment in those fine eyes of his.

“Your reflection, I hope, leads you to see the wisdom of what I suggest.”

“In a measure it does,” said I. He caught his breath, and stared at me, a light of joy leaping suddenly to his eyes.

“You agree, Lescure?”

“Let me understand what you offer,” I returned, affecting the harshness of one driven to a repugnant step.

“Ten thousand livres and your property at Beaugency.”

I leant across the table and spoke quickly.

“Add the locket with the portrait of Mdlle. de Trécillac, and you may walk out of this inn,” said I.

At that he scowled, and I blushed to think what a base traitor I must appear to him.

“Well?” I demanded roughly.

“You ask too much.”

“You refuse?” I demanded.

“I refuse.”

“Bethink you, Noailles—”

“It is useless to talk, M. de Lescure. I cannot restore the locket!”

“Then you will come to Paris.”

“I cannot restore the locket,” he repeated coldly.

At that I got up in a rage that was not simulated, and strode to the door.

“Very well, M. de Noailles,” I threatened. “We shall see if we cannot find it for ourselves.” Then opening the door I raised my voice. “Baptiste, André!” I called.

“What will you do?” he exclaimed, springing up.

“Arrest you,” I replied with a disdainful smile, “and have you searched. We shall see now. M. de Noailles—”

“Stay,” he commanded sharply. He gazed at me with a look so pregnant with disgust that I could have struck him. “This is the second

time in connection with that locket that you would cheat me," he commented bitterly. "But there, M. de Lescure, I do not wish to anger you with recriminations. I wish rather to withhold a step that must be irrevocable and which will yield you nothing. The locket is in safe keeping."

"So shall you be unless you produce it," I retorted. "My men are coming up."

"Send them back, Lescure, and I will at least attempt to restore your locket. I cannot promise, but I will do my best, and if I fail, you can still arrest me."

My pulses throbbed. The horror of the Bastille appalled him at last. He was about to melt.

I looked at him for a second, then I did as he desired, and sent off my men on a trumpery errand.

He walked to the window and looked out, then turned to me again.

"If I get back this locket for you," he asked, "what guarantee do you give me that I shall be allowed to go free?"

"I swear it on my honour," I answered.

He smiled sadly.

"I must be content with that, for all that your behaviour recently hardly justifies an excess of faith."

"Monsieur!"

"Pish! I am your prisoner. Give me pen, ink and paper, and within four hours it may be that you shall have your portrait. But with your permission, Lescure, I will so couch this note that it shall do duty against you if you break your word."

"Write as you please, monsieur," said I impatiently.

He paused a moment, pen in hand, then holding it out to me—

"Better still, Lescure, you shall write the note yourself at my dictation."

I took the pen (What did it signify who wrote the note?) and at his bidding I set down the following:

M. de Noailles is my prisoner here, at the Hotel de Berri, at La Chatre, and upon the warrant of a lettre de cachet, I am to deliver him to the Governor of the Bastille. But in consideration of his restoring to me

the locket which four nights ago he won from me at play in Paris, I do hereby undertake and solemnly pledge my honour to allow him to go free.

"Sign it," said he, and I obeyed him.

He left me for a moment to despatch a messenger, whose return thereafter I awaited with impatience, yet well pleased with the outcome of the adventure, which was such as was desired by both M. de Sratines and myself.

Early in the afternoon, as I sat with Noailles, a waiter entered with the announcement that I was being asked for below. I desired him to conduct the visitor to the room in which we sat, and a moment later, to my amazement, Mademoiselle de Trécillac herself was ushered in.

"Madeline!" I cried, and would have rushed forward had not something in the glance of her eyes, in the poise of her head, restrained and chilled me. Looking past me at my companion—

"I have received this letter, M. de Noailles," she said, "and I ask your pardon for having doubted your word. I see that you told me the truth. Though repugnant, I cannot in consideration of what has befallen, refuse to comply with what I understand to be your wishes."

"Madeline!" he cried in his turn, but in accents of joy as he advanced to kiss the hand she yielded him with a sad smile. The turning to me—

"M. de Lescure," she said very coldly, "I am come to purchase M. de Noailles' liberty from you at your own price. Here is the locket against the return of which you have pledged yourself to set him free."

She placed the little gem-framed picture on the table, whilst I stood like one who has drunk overmuch and whose wits work slowly. Then little by little I came to understand what earlier I should have guessed—that when I had come upon Noailles the day before in the inn yard, the gentleman was already on his return journey from Trécillac to Paris.

I drew myself up with what assumption of dignity I could command.

"M. de Noailles," said I, "you are free to depart. But see that you tarry not in France."

Without touching the locket, I bowed to them, and sore beyond all conception, I left them together and went below to order my men to saddle. And as I rode back to Paris, my only consolation was that, from M. de Sartines' pont of view, my mission had succeeded admirably. As much consolation did it prove to me as a fine landscape may prove to a blind man.

The Devourer of Hearts

The Realm, September 1904

She came upon me unexpectedly as I was walking in my garden at Choisy, bewailing the Autumn that swooped down apace like a bird of prey to devour my cherished blossoms. The rumble of a coach heralded her coming, and as in my curiosity I craned my neck to see who my visitor might be, out stepped Léonie herself, as beautiful a thing, I'll swear, as any of God's making. She came to me all smiles and archness; and in that sisterly manner which she was wont to assume toward me, but which of a certainty she had refrained from adopting had she guessed how deeply it hurt, she announced that she had need of my assistance. I swore myself her humblest slave as ever, and she proceeded:

"I have been to the King, Guy," she cried, "and my intercessions have won Lawrence's pardon. See," and she drew from some mysterious corner of her gown a portentous parchment. "Here is the Royal warrant. His Majesty's sole condition is that the Vicomte shall absent himself from France for three years, until Castelnaudary and this rebellion be forgotten."

"His Majesty is very clement," said I. "But then—you interceded."

She laughed coyly, and her blue eyes flashed me a well-pleased glance—for, bon Dieu! she was the vainest beauty in all Paris.

"I shall carry him this pardon myself," she continued. "The poor boy is hiding somewhere in Languédoc, and we must find him, Guy."

"We?" quoth I. "What companions have you chosen?"

At that she felt confused, but only for a moment. Presently her eyes were raised to mine again, and she was smiling in allurement.

"I came to ask you to go with me, Guy. You see I am all alone, with the exception of Madame la Comtesse, who is much too enfeebled to undertake the journey. Then, too, on such an errand a male escort is of necessity, and my brother is with his regiment."

"But, Léonie," I cried aghast, "bethink you what you are proposing. What will the world say? Mademoiselle de Montivry has left Paris under the escort of Guy de Chatellerault. A fine story that, on my life!"

"What shall it signify what the world says? I go to my affianced husband, and when I return it shall be as his wife, and so sheltered from evil tongues."

I vow I turned pale at that. That someday she would wed the Vicomte I knew, just as I knew that someday I must die. The thing had been arranged while she was in her swaddling clothes, and she had been educated to the idea ever since she had begun to grow into the lovely creature that she had become. She did not love the Vicomte—indeed, she scarcely knew him, for she had not seen him half-a-dozen times all her life. But her marriage to him she looked upon as an inevitable something that must come to her with womanhood. It I seem to suggest that she did not love him because she did not know him, let me hasten to disabuse your mind. Because she did not know him she did not hate him.

No worse, perhaps, than most courtiers of the days of Louis XIII, yet I vow he was as bad as any, and the scandals that attached to his name defied all reckoning. Since his father's death his indiscretions had grown more flagrant, until in the end His Majesty had banished him for a spell from Court. Smarting under the indignity, he had offered his sword to the Duke of Orleans and had fought at Castelnaudary among the Spanish riff-raff that Gaston had brought into that field of scurvy memory. Proscribed and hunted as were his fellow-rebels, from Montmorency downward, his fate—so richly deserved—had been a source of unrest to that angel, Léonie, until in the end she had interceded and won his pardon from Louis.

That her wedding should be accelerated by the very facts that should have retarded it, shocked me inexpressibly. I was filled with a dull anger against Villebon, against her, against myself; and that anger, to my shame I write it, found expression. I had known her from childhood; we had been as brother and sister, until it had come to me to alter the relationship. That was two years ago, and since then I had made love to her desperately, ardently, passionately—but, alack, fruitlessly! Ever had she chid me for my gentle ways, my slender frame, my dainty hands. I was a man of songs, she had said, of pretty utterances; whilst her lover—but that she was already affianced—must have been a man of action; a hero of great deeds; the victor of a hundred combats. This I cast back at her now in my reply.

"What shall a writer of verses do upon such an enterprise?" I asked her bitterly. "You will require a paladin for your escort."

"But no," said she, ignoring the ungenerous quality of my words, "there will be no fighting."

At that my manner grew yet worse. I was brusque as any clown. I bade her—the precise words I have mercifully forgotten—seek elsewhere for a protector. But when I had done she nestled up to me; her eyes raised to mine, and her hand was laid caressingly upon my arm, so that all my harshness fell from me on the instant.

"That is unlike you, Guy," said she. "Are my troubles of so little account to you—you who call yourself my friend?" I humbly craved forgiveness, and swore my readiness to do whatever she might command me.

"Now you are the Guy I know. The dear, kind, gentle Guy who is my friend." She moved a step or two away from me. "When you are so I have a kindness for you," she said.

"Yes," I rejoined, my bitterness returning, "such a kindness as have I for my roses when they bloom." And I waved an angry hand over a faded bush.

"And were I not affianced to M. de Villebon—" She stopped short, and over her shoulder she threw me a glance from eyes that laughed at once in mockery and affection.

"Léonie!" I cried, and in an instant I was beside her. I caught her in my arms and held her there with a force that must have hurt, whilst into her ear I poured once more the story of my love for her. I reminded her that this Villebon was nothing to her; that she did not love him; that she would never love him—yet was I gentleman enough even in my madness to say nothing of those ugly tales that all Paris was reciting touching the Vicomte's disreputable adventures.

At last she broke from me, and confronted me panting, an angry spot of red on either cheek. Then she smiled wistfully.

"You have told me all, Guy, have you not?" she asked softly. "And we will speak of it no more—is it not so, my friend? You have confessed. I absolve you, and here make you your act of contrition and sin no more, for if you do I may not even count you my friend. And so I value your friendship, Guy. But love"—she sighed—"it is something that I think will never come to me; which, after all, is very well, for I am to marry M. de Villebon. You'll not desert me, Guy?"

What could I answer? What could any man answer who truly loved with a devotion that amounted almost to awe—as true love should do. I promised that I would allow my folly to transpire no more. I would curb and suppress it, and she might count upon me to help her find the worthless Vicomte to whom she was betrothed.

On the morrow we started for the South—she in her coach, attended by her maid; I on horseback, with my servant Charlot riding at my heels. Yesterday's scene seemed all forgotten by her, and when she saw me booted and spurred for the journey, encased in a jerkin of leather and with a great sword girt to me, she laughed and made a mock of my warlike trappings and the martial air which she swore I had put on with this grim raiment. I suffered her jests in silence; I even smiled when she called me Duguesclin: for all that the gibe cut me sorely.

Some slight adventures had we when we came into Languédoc, and during the diligent search I instituted for M. de Villebon, owing to the suspicions of the peasantry, who were one and all for the Duke Gaston, and who doubted the intentions of our quest for one of his adherents. At last, however, success attended my efforts, and I gleaned

the information that at Les Martyrs—a little village on the spurs of the Cevennes—I should probably find him we sought.

Thither we rode, therefore, and we gained the place one evening at dusk. We repaired to the Auberge Béarnaise—the only hostelry of any consequence in the only street of that hill-side village. We proceeded with caution, and it was not until we had seated ourselves to sup in the common-room—there was no other—that I thought it well to broach the matter which had brought us. Such knowledge as they might have they were inclined to deal with as a snail with its horns.

There were four men in the room, sitting over by the chimney with the landlord, and by way of introduction I called upon the host to lay a couple of his best bottles at their disposal. It was done with alacrity, and, having thus gained their good favour, I engaged those burly, evil-looking mountain men in conversation. I touched in passing upon the state of France and the late disturbances, and I spoke of the Cardinal with a grimace, of the King with a sneer, and of Gaston with a sigh and an adjective of praise. My manner gradually thawed them, and when presently I grew bolder in my allusions, to the point, I'll swear, of being guilty of high treason, an air of utter good-fellowship settled over us.

Mademoiselle supped in silence, but her glance of approval was encouraging. She had been kinder to me of late; for perhaps she had come to see that when the occasion demanded it I could become, to some extent at least, the man of action that she chid me for not being.

Deeming them ripe at last, I touched more closely upon the business that had brought us, informing them that we were in quest of a gentleman who had followed the fortunes of Gaston into the disastrous field of Castelnaudary, and whom we desired to equip with the means of taking himself into safety beyond Pyrenees.

"If you were to tell us his name, Monsieur," said Dangeau, the landlord, "we might assist you." He was a superior fellow, this Dangeau, a man of speech and manners somewhat above his station, and no doubt a man of much consequence upon that countryside, holding himself in high esteem.

"It is Monsieur le Vicomte Laurence de Villebon whom we are seeking," said I, and had I cast a bomb into their midst it could not have

surprised them more. Seeing them start, and noting the significant glances that passed between them—"Clearly, my masters," I added, "the name is not unknown to you."

"It is not indeed, Monsieur," returned Dangeau, with a greater cordiality than he had yet shown us, "and if your friend be the Vicomte, you are very welcome."

A girl who had entered the common-room at that moment, hearing the words, stood still to survey us. She was a handsome wench, strongly resembling Dangeau. She was tall, with a shapely length of limb and an admirably poised head, richly crowned with soft, lustrous black hair. Black, too, and remarkable were her eyes, and as I now returned her glance it crossed my mind that one might travel far before chancing upon her equal in looks and grace. That air of superiority to the surroundings that I had remarked in Dangeau was carried in her to the point almost of aloofness.

"These voyageurs," said the landlord to the girl, "are friends of M. le Vicomte." The girl continued to stare at us in a fashion that showed me plainly her manners were far below the level of her grand air.

"I am charmed, M. l'Hote," said I, "to discover that we have fallen among people who appear no less friendly disposed to him. Where, sir, can I find the Vicomte?"

He seemed on point of answering, when suddenly the girl set her hand on his arm.

"Are you satisfied that we can trust them?" she inquired.

"Ah," quoth Dangeau, taking a deep breath. Then to me—"Monsieur will forgive me, for you must appreciate the dangers. Can you give me any proof of your attachment to M. le Vicomte? What is your precise relationship with him?"

"This lady, Master Dangeau," I announced, "is the Vicomte's betrothed, and she has journeyed into Languédoc to wed him and to go with him into exile."

Now if awhile ago the mention of Villebon's name had sown surprise amongst them, the effect it had produced was as nothing compared with the disorder into which this fresh announcement appeared to throw them. Again there were gasps and glances exchanged,

whilst the girl's great eyes seemed to dilate, though otherwise she remained erect and cold. Then Dangeau exploded.

"It is a lie!" he shouted, bringing down his fist upon the table so violently that a jug of wine was overset into my lap. That said, he eyed me a moment with deepening suspicion, and as I essayed to rise he thrust me back into my chair. "Look to the door, Pierre," he called to one of the four ruffians. "We have spies amongst us, it seems, but, by God, we shall know how to deal with them."

"When you have recovered the use of your wits," said I, coolly mopping the wine from my haut-de-chausses, "perhaps you will explain how I have provoked this thunderstorm?"

"You need explanations, do you?" he sneered. "You have told, me plainly enough that it is for no friendly purpose that you seek the Vicomte. Bah! I know you well enough. The province is infested by spies of your kidney, lending themselves to the work of trapping these poor fugitives. You played your rôle finely, and had you not overshot the mark, you had duped us. But when you present your companion as the Vicomte's betrothed, you go too far; for the Vicomte's future wife, my master, stands there."

And he pointed to his daughter. There was a sudden catch in Mademoiselle's breath as she rose to her feet, but the swiftness with which she grasped the situation and the calm with which she spoke amazed me.

"Since that is so, Monsieur, our journey has indeed been wasted, and nothing remains for us but to withdraw, regretting the intrusion."

The words were ill-timed, and they added fuel to the host's suspicions.

"Withdraw?" he roared. "By the Mass, you shall not stir foot from here until it please me, and it is more than likely you'll never stir at all. We have a short way with spies. Here, my lads, lay hands on these friends of my Lord Cardinal."

Mademoiselle grew pale at that for all her spirit, and her eyes that were turned toward me said, as plainly as if she had spoken: "If only you were a man of action, my poor Guy!" And be it that that glance spurred me to it, or be it that the latest militant instincts of my blood welled up to

meet the occasion— a man of action I became. I had risen now, and picking up a three-legged stool—for my sword I realised would avail me little in the rough-and-tumble that was like to follow—I waved it lustily.

"Let but a finger be laid on Mademoiselle, and I'll brain the man that dares it," I threatened.

There was a short laugh from one of them, and he sprang toward me. I have a notion that I closed my eyes—for I was new to skull-cracking, and haply a trifle squeamish. But I brought my stool down with a sickening crash upon his stupid head, and felled him. Again I raised that improvised battle-axe, and this time, with eyes wide open that I might not err, I caught another ruffian, who had set hands upon Léonie, so well gauged a blow that he staggered backwards, and throwing up his arms dropped full length, whilst the blood, streaming from a gash in his forehead, seemed to cover his face in an instant.

With a moan of horror Mademoiselle shrank back against the wall and put her hands to her eyes. I—suddenly transformed into a very Jupiter tonans—stood my ground defiantly, ready to launch that thunderbolt of a stool upon the next who should try conclusions with me. Then suddenly old Dangeau seized a musketoon that had stood in a corner, and it would have fared ill with me but that before he could raise it to his shoulder a cry from his daughter arrested him. The door had been pushed open, and on the threshold stood the Vicomte de Villebon himself. A pause fell upon all present, as with a look of the profoundest amazement the Vicomte advanced into the room, his eyes devouring Léonie. It was he who broke at last the silence that now reigned.

"You here, Mademoiselle!" he exclaimed.

"As you perceive, Monsieur," said she very quietly, her face giving no sign of concern beyond its extreme pallor. "If you have any influence with these good people, perhaps you will give yourself the trouble of prevailing upon them not to cut our throats."

"But what has happened?" he inquired, and in the place of the easy, graceful dignity that was usually his, his bearing was now a mixture of bewilderment and sheepishness.

“These people,” Dangeau explained in truculent accents, “came here to seek you, but they introduced themselves with the falsehood that this lady is your affianced wife.”

“It is a falsehood, is it not, Laurence?” cried the girl, stepping close up to him, and putting the question in beseeching accents.

“Oh ça, my dear Sophie,” he laughed brazenly, as who would say: “How could it be other than false?” Then to Dangeau—”Let me have a word in private with these good friends of mine,” said he, his attempt at jauntiness failing miserably. “They were well-intentioned in the statement that they made; for that they may have transcended accuracy in their zeal to discover me.”

Scarcely believing my ears, I looked at Léonie. She was smiling curiously.

“If you are playing fast and loose with us,” began Dangeau, his brow black with menace. But the Vicomte, drawing himself up with an assumption of his usual arrogance, cut him short—

“Monsieur,” said he, “what I have pledged my word to do I do.”

But when presently we three—the Vicomte, Mademoiselle and I—were in an inner room, Villebon’s words were less high-sounding.

“Mademoiselle,” he said, “to you it will be clear that this undignified position in which you find me has been forced upon me by necessity. My marrying this girl is a matter too preposterous for consideration.”

“Ah,” said she coldly, “and the breaking of that child’s heart no doubt a matter too insignificant to need consideration either.”

At that his manner became suddenly offensive.

“Why are you come to Languédoc, Mademoiselle?” he demanded insolently—so insolently that I had visions of resuming my performances with the three-legged stool.

“To drive a bargain with you, M. le Vicomte,” she answered, a note of anger ringing in her voice as well. “Tell me—how came you into such relations with that girl?”

Villebon, the devourer of hearts, answered her with easy flippancy and an expressive shrug.

"Faut s'amuser," he declared. "It was so dull and ennuyant hiding from the King's gentlemen."

Léonie demanded details, and he afforded them. It was just such a story as I had expected to hear. Dalliance was to the Vicomte as the breath of his nostrils—a necessity of life. The trouble that in Paris it had visited upon him had not taught him any salutary lesson; in the provinces he had resumed the pastime, and heaven alone knows how many banal affairs he had not scattered in his passage through Languédoc. But here at this inn at Les Martyrs he had entered upon one that was to bring him more serious consequences. Whilst in hiding there, protected by this staunch Orléaniste, Dangeau, he had amused himself by making love to Sophie. To him it could be no more than amusement; but it was an amusement of which the poor girl— not being a fine lady of Court—knew nothing. To her it was a serious matter, and she accepted each well-worn phrase of gallantry in its literal sense, as a true expression of sentiment. Realising at last the indiscretion of his behaviour,

Villebon had sought to beat a retreat. But at the first sign of this, old Dangeau had stepped forward. He had observed, and in his simplicity taken as earnest the Vicomte's wooing of his daughter—for those montagnards of Languédoc have a curious ignorance of the distinctions of rank that prevail in other provinces—and he was not minded that this debonair young rebel should break his daughter's heart. He had protested against the Vicomte's departure; he had reasoned with him touching Sophie, and I am satisfied that the musketoon was advanced as a weighty piece of logic. Moreover, Villebon realised that Dangeau might even avenge himself by delivering him up to the King, and he had no appetite for being broken on the wheel, so that out of fear he had temporised by a promise to marry Sophie so soon as he might conveniently do so.

"But," the Vicomte concluded, with a deprecatory smile, "you will agree, Mademoiselle, that it were a heavy price to pay for the amusement of expressing a few pretty sentiments."

"I own it heavy, but you must pay it, Monsieur," she said, whereat I stared at her in my amazement.

"'Tis a good jest, that," he laughed, displaying his fine teeth.

"It is no jest at all, Monsieur."

His jaw dropped, and he eyed her in bewilderment, sobered by her sternness.

"But, Mademoiselle, I am betrothed to you!"

"We will not speak of that again, if you please," she answered coldly. And, ashamed, he hung his head, realising that indeed for one who had promised marriage to Dangeau's daughter to speak of being betrothed to Mademoiselle de Montivry was an insolence too gross.

They wrangled awhile after that: she telling him that he must wed the girl, he laughing the notion to scorn.

"You pledged your word," she cried at last, burning with indignation—for she was beginning to know this very choice Vicomte. "In my hearing you renewed the pledge. Will you be dishonoured?"

At that he abandoned mockery, and grew solemn as a father-confessor. He expostulated with her, whereupon she turned to threats and to the bargain which she had come to drive with him.

"Monsieur de Villebon," said she, "at Jarnages, this afternoon, we passed a company of the King's dragoons. They are closing round this part of the Cevennes, and at this hour your escape will already be impossible. By morning you will be a prisoner. Your fate you can guess, Monsieur."

He turned pale at that. On the battlefield he may have been brave as a lion; but the thought of the wheel gave his stomach an unpleasant turn.

"Now, Monsieur, attend to this. I have it in my power to save your life. I can open a way for you into Spain, and within three years I can promise your return to France, where you shall find your estates unsequestrated. But before I do this for you I will see you wedded to Sophie Dangeau."

"How will you fulfil all these fine promises?" he asked, amazed.

"I do not lie, Monsieur. I have said that I can do it. Be that sufficient. Will you accept my conditions, or will you be taken to Toulouse and the scaffold? Resolve yourself."

For all that his heart was numb with fear, he still sought to temporise. But Mademoiselle was obdurate. When he advanced that Sophie was not a wife he could take to Paris, she answered him that there was no need for it. Indeed, Paris would be unhealthy for him for years to come. There was his estate in Picardy. Let him take her there when he returned from Spain, and let him spend the first year of their wedded life in preparing her to become a creditable Vicomtesse. In the end the gallant Villebon was beaten and forced to yield.

He was barely in time, for scarcely had he accepted Léonie's terms when the door opened to admit Dangeau, with a scared face.

"Les Martyrs is surrounded by dragoons, Vicomte," he announced.

"Trust to me," said Léonie. Then turning to Dangeau—"The Vicomte," she informed him, "is safe, but he will be compelled to start at sunrise for Spain. Your daughter, he will tell you, goes with him as his wife. There is no time to lose, and you had best send for Monsieur le Curé at once."

While the priest was being sought the dragoons arrived, and the officer in command entered the inn and formally arrested Villebon. But Mademoiselle took the Captain aside, with the result that five minutes later he desired the mystified Vicomte to be in readiness to start for Spain at daybreak under his escort.

We saw the nuptials solemnised that night, and when as day was breaking the troop was ready to conduct the Vicomte across the border, Léonie took him aside.

"So far I have done what I promised," she said, "and you may rest assured that I shall keep my word till the end. When the three years of your exile are at an end you shall receive a pardon warranting your return to France. But this I promise you only on condition that you are good to that child, and that you make her a worthy husband. Fail me in that, and you are not likely to see France again as long as you live."

Solemnly he swore to resign himself to what he now accounted his destiny. With that oath he took his leave of Léonie and accompanied by his wife he set out in the charge of the dragoons.

When at last he was gone—

“An eventful night, Guy, was it not?” quoth Léonie. “And I think that we both acquitted ourselves well. I have wronged you in the past, my friend, for you fought like a lion.”

“The greatest fight was yours—on that girl’s behalf,” I answered.

“Nay, Guy, not on her behalf; on my own. It was my liberty from Villebon which I was fighting for.”

“You are wonderful, Léonie,” I cried, adding with a sigh—”I wish with all my heart that I had not promised you a week ago, in my garden at Choisy, n ever to speak of love again.”

She looked at me for a moment with a smile so tender and kind that a doubt surged wildly through my mind. Then holding out both hands to me she turned my doubts to certainty.

“We will go back to your garden at Choisy, Guy; and if you should elect to break your promise, I’ll think you none the less a very gallant gentleman.”

The Metamorphosis of Colin

Ainslee's, September 1904

Colin Hartington came home to find himself famous.

He had left England four years ago, giving out that he was going abroad for pleasure—the pleasure, scandalmongers had it, being that peculiarly immoral delight which some people find in the evasion of clamorous and insistent creditors.

He had done himself pretty well, had Colin Hartington, in the three years that lay between his coming of age and his abrupt departure from England. He had done a little—a very little—work, made a little love, and spent a little money—the "little" in the latter case representing all that had been left him by the none too wealthy gentleman who had the honor of being his father.

Abroad he had worked. Lacking the means to devote himself to the enjoyable idleness ever dear to his heart, he had turned to the cultivation of the gifts he unquestionably possessed, though mainly latent. He had sent his work home. It had found a ready market, grown in value, and in four little years brought him enough fame to turn the head of any ordinary young man of twenty-seven. But Colin was not an ordinary young man. Success left him cold and unchanged, not even going the length of straightening out the moral obliquity of his character concerning his debts. He overlooked them one and all—if indeed the word may be employed to express an attitude wherein accident had no part.

And so it chanced that a few of his creditors, who had hailed his triumphs and his home-coming as the heralds of a settlement, discovered

that they had run before their horse to market. Some went the length of bearding him with their claims; but he wriggled and slipped through their hands, as he wriggled and slipped through every other unpleasant thing that life offered him.

He was sorry—there were at times tears in his voice when he protested it—he was desperately sorry for the inconvenience they were suffering, but he besought them—and here his accents would grow seductive as a siren's—to give him time. He had no means to speak of, and if they pressed him they would only disgrace him to no purpose, while if they waited and gave him an opportunity of earning something he would satisfy them. Fame was his. In the wake of fame, fortune has been known to journey.

"Give me a chance and you will see," was his manner of winding up his conciliatory, patience-inspiring addresses.

The last thing they thought they were likely to see was their money. But—realizing perhaps what a broken reed for a creditor to lean upon is the law—they reluctantly agreed to wait.

And while they waited, Colin Hartington spent his not inconsiderable earnings with that delightful recklessness characteristic of his happy-go-lucky nature.

How long this atrocious state of things might have prevailed but for the intervention of Mary Escott, there is no saying with any degree of certainty, though we might hazard a guess that it would have prevailed until a second flitting from England became imperative.

She, however, was destined to work his metamorphosis, to arrest his progress along the road of unconscious dishonesty that leads to perdition in the abstract and the County Court in the concrete.

In the years of his adolescence Colin had been very fond of Mary Bishop—Bishop was her maiden name. There had been certain tender passages between them, and the building of a love that Colin's financial shortcomings had cruelly nipped. Abroad he learned that she had married. At the news he had sighed prettily, and smiled with fond, retrospective amusement, for he had known one or two other, and even greater, passions since that which Mary had inspired. Later he had learned that her husband was dead, and this time he had sighed

perfunctorily and without smiling, believing himself genuinely affected by the picture of her widowhood which his mind had conjured up. Thereafter he had forgotten her, which platitude-monging cynics tell us is human nature's vile way.

And now of a sudden he came face to face with her once more. It was at a regimental dance in his native town of Stollbridge, and the colonel's wife had hustled him across and presented him as the lion of the hour.

They had smiled upon each other the quiet smile, fraught with never so little sadness, that is peculiar to souls stripped of their illusions.

The colonel's wife had gone far away, and Colin, seating himself beside her, was scribbling hieroglyphs on her dance card with a clumsiness that would never have led you to suspect his penmanship to be worth something like sixpence a word. Then he looked at her for a moment, and, in words robbed by the genuineness of their intonation of the last vestige of impertinence, whispered:

"Molly, how beautiful you have grown!"

"Colin," she mocked back, "how clever you have become!" And they laughed together.

"Tell me," said she presently, "how does it feel to be a lion?"

"One longs for the mouse to come and gnaw the cords and allow one to get up and stretch."

She knit her brows.

"What an artificial speech!" she cried. "Why do you talk like that?"

"It's expected of me, I suppose, and it illustrates my meaning when I refer to the cords that bind a lion and the stretching of the limbs so ardently desired."

"I have read your books, Colin," said she, after a pause.

"Can you see anything in them?" he asked, contemptuously.

"I can see you in them, Colin. They reflect you constantly, they sound like you."

He flushed with pleasure, not at the words, but at the laudatory tone in which they were uttered.

"No? Do they, though? Molly, I'm glad at last that I wrote them. I never thought much of them until now, but if they served to bring me to your memory, my work has not been wasted."

His fine, dark eyes were bent ardently upon her. She laughed and set herself to gently move her fan.

"You mustn't stare at me like that, Colin. People are looking at us."

But Colin was not to be repressed. The whole world might look on, for all that he cared. The old feelings of some four years ago were being resuscitated. He was quite conscious of the fact. "Love," he murmured rhapsodically, "is a flame difficult of reignition, where once it has been quenched. But let that reignition take place, and its blaze is all-consuming."

"Is this apropos of boots?" she inquired with a puzzled air.

"Perhaps," he answered boldly, "but it is something that I have just realized. I have cultivated the habit of thinking aloud."

"How uncomfortable!" she commented, nervously.

But however fully Colin realized his statement, he was to realize it more fully still when some two hours later— toward the close of the evening—he found himself at Molly's side in the conservatory. He rejoiced his eyes in the contemplation of the perfect curve of her white throat and the glistening masses of her ebony hair, while in the clear depths of her frank gaze his soul at last was drowned. His hand closed upon hers, his fine, foolish, young head was bent until he felt her tresses against his cheek.

"Molly," he stammered, before he knew what he was saying, "I—I love you."

She moved her head from the dangerous propinquity of his. The action was a rebuff, but the soft, seductive laughter that rippled from her lips negated what effect it might have had upon hot-headed Colin. He took it for a challenge, and upon the instant his arm was about her, and he was seeking to draw her to him. But she broke from his clasp, and pushing him forcibly backward, she stood up suddenly. She laughed no longer. Her breath came quickly, and her tone was one of stern rebuke.

"Colin, I am very disappointed in you."

Poor Colin sat morally crushed and defeated, where a moment ago he had tasted the joyous anticipation of victory. He felt extremely foolish and annoyed with himself and with her. It became now a matter of extricating himself from a situation that he realized to be extremely undignified. A retreat from the position he had taken up would, he felt, be more ridiculous still. At all costs he must push on.

"What have I dared that should offend you?" he demanded, in accents of beautifully modulated aggrievance. "Is it an insult to tell a woman that you love her?"

She made as if to answer, but before she had time, he was on his feet, close beside her, speaking very fast.

"There are some things in life that endure as long as life itself, things that we cannot blot out, strive as we will. My love for you, Molly, is one of those things. When four years ago I left England you cannot dream how it hurt me to go from you. But I hoped—I— I don't know what I hoped. Then I heard abroad of your marriage, and I never wished to return home. I was crushed—broken-hearted, people call it. Then, later, I heard of your widowhood, and in my selfishness—for what love worthy of the name is not selfish?—I was almost glad of it. Success came at last, and thinking ever of you, I determined to come home and lay my laurels at your feet, asking you, as I ask you now, Molly, to do me the honor to become my wife."

Her attitude during that lengthy address of his had been one of forebidding iciness. But as he brought it to a conclusion with the offer of his hand and name, a change seemed suddenly to come over her. She bent towards him, and on her face he might have read surprise, wonder and some pleasure too—or perhaps it was amusement. You see, she knew him so very well.

"Molly!" he cried, and put forth his arms. But she drew back again. Someone had entered the conservatory.

"Come and see me to-morrow," she had murmured, and slipping her hand through his arm, impelled him to conduct her back to the ballroom.

When he reviewed the scene in the sober light of the following day, Colin was not a little surprised at himself. He had made a mistake,

and to get out of offending her he had lied like a gentleman and asked her to marry him—than which nothing could have been farther from his intentions. Her beauty, however, tempered his dismay, and pursuing his reflections he concluded that he might do much worse than wed her. He came to the conclusion—among others—that it was just by such accidents of a momentary concession to the emotions that half the world's matches were effected.

In the afternoon he called upon her. She welcomed him as though there had been no such scene as that of the night before between them, and seating him in a wicker chair she gave him tea under the beeches on the lawn. He dissembled as best he might the nervousness that despite himself possessed him, sipped his tea and talked small talk in his best society manner, Gradually her admirable self-control thawed him, and at length, as he set down his cup, he opened his batteries.

"Molly, I have come for my answer."

"Answer?" Her eyebrows went up and her blue eyes looked at him in silent surprise.

"To my last night's—er— question," he enlightened her.

Her gaze fell and became engrossed in the white, shapely hands so demurely folded in her lap.

"You were in earnest, then?"

He murmured some triteness about the earnestness—the solemnity—of the subject, which entailed a lifetime of devotion. He attempted to tell her how much she was to him; failed in a masterly manner, and broke down with a touching suggestion that no words could do justice to his feelings.

"You do me a great honor, Colin. I—I never thought that you felt like that."

"How could you mistake me?" he cried, reproachfully

"Before I answer you, Colin," she said, disregarding his outcry, "I have something to say to you. You see I am not like a foolish young girl, ignorant of the world and its ways. Matrimony has taught me a certain wisdom which prompts me—cold and sordid though it may appear—to remind you that your reputation is in rather a bad way and requires mending."

“My reputation?” he cried, aghast. She nodded.

“But what can anyone say against it? I have only been a week or so at home, and during the time, I can assure you that my circumspection has been in every way above reproach.”

“Oh, I know all that. We are at cross-purposes perhaps. I refer to your debts.”

“Oh!” said Colin, and his jaw fell. She had touched the weak spot in his armor.

“You do not deny them?”

“Deny them?” he echoed, with a touch of satire. “No fear of that. My creditors might proceed to extremes if I did.”

“You speak with a levity that hurts me, Colin.”

“Good Lord! Molly, we are not discussing religion.”

“I am not so sure. We are discussing what appears to be your religion—that of not paying your just debts.”

“But, my dear child,” he protested, “this is absurd. Where is the man who is without them?”

“In moderation, perhaps.”

“Moderation? And does anyone dare to suggest that mine are immoderate?”

“I do.”

“Oh, I say. Come now. A few thousand would clear them all up.”

“Then why don’t you clear them all up?”

“Because—well, because I haven’t thousands enough.”

“But surely you might pay the more important ones. You know, Colin, it hurts me to talk to you on such a subject, but I do so because, knowing you as I do, I feel that you do not realize the positive dishonesty of your behavior.”

“Dishonesty?” he gasped.

“It never occurred to you in that light, did it?”

Colin got up. He felt that she was going rather too far.

“Look here, Molly, what on earth are we discussing this for? I am sure I didn’t come here to talk about my debts.”

“I am quite sure you didn’t. But I thought that, after what you said last night, I had a right to go into it. I could never consent, under any

circumstances, to listen to the advances of a man who deliberately refuses to pay what he owes."

"But I do not deliberately refuse," he answered with some heat. "I intend to pay every penny. Besides, Molly, these debts of mine are vastly overrated, no doubt by those people who do me the questionable honor of talking of my affairs. I have really only one formidable creditor. To the others I owe perhaps a couple of thousand in all. I'll settle up those to-morrow if you wish it and clear off the other one—the big one—as soon as I can comfortably manage it. Will that convince you of my good intentions?"

"How much does the big debt amount to? she asked, implacably.

"About seven thousand."

"Heavens, Colin! How did you manage it?"

"Well, you see, they were my father's solicitors, and they advanced me money—about ten thousand or so—on stock that I inherited and which I was holding for a rise. I was unlucky; instead of the rise there was the deuce of a slump, leaving me in Wilfrid and Lagdale's debt to the tune of some seven thousand pounds. Sheer ill luck, Molly!"

"And you wish to leave such a debt—a debt of honor—to be paid when you can comfortably manage it," she cried in horror. "Colin, I am ashamed of you."

"But what am I to do? If I were to scrape together every available penny I might just manage to pay it. But the inconvenience would be appalling."

"No matter what the inconvenience, you should liquidate that debt without a moment's delay. It is worse with you than I thought, Colin. This is no ordinary debt. It's payment at the earliest moment is a sacred duty."

Colin hung his head, realizing that she was quite right. It was a sad reflection. Then he raised his eyes and they met hers. She smiled at him, and he told himself that she was very beautiful. To win her even the effort—the sacrifice—she demanded would be but little.

"Molly," he declared, "for your sake I will do it, no matter how much it hampers me. But when it is done—"

“Do it first,” she checked him with a laugh. “We will talk about the rest afterwards.”

Thus was the metamorphosis of Colin effected, and thus was he prevailed upon to pay the heaviest portion of his debts and abandon the careless ways he had trodden.

He posted a check to Wilfrid and Langdale, and two days later he called upon Mary Escott with the receipt in his pocket and a fever of anticipation in his soul which he mistook for the glow of satisfaction said to result from the performance of one’s duty.

She received him with metaphorically— and only metaphorically—open arms.

“My dear Colin,” she cried before he had said a word, “you have behaved nobly, and I shall ever feel proud to think that I was instrumental in recalling you to a sense of your duty.”

Colin looked askance.

“You know that I have paid Wilfrid and Langdale?” he faltered.

“Why, yes. I had a letter from my husband this morning, in which he mentioned that he had received your check.”

“Your husband!” he echoed, with mouth agape.

“Yes; Mr. Escott, you know, is the present Wilfrid and Langdale—has been for the past two years.”

“But—but—What are you talking about, Molly? Mr. Escott has been dead for over two years.”

“Oh, dear no, Colin. Surely I should know. You are thinking of Mr. Plunkett, my first husband.”

Colin’s eyes seemed to roll in his head. He certainly turned pale. For a moment she thought he would burst out into denunciations. Then with a sudden, jerky movement he reached out for his hat.

“Good morning,” said he, and was gone before she could say another word.